



♪ 杉井 光

さよならピアノソナタ

イラスト 植田 亮

"I will disappear when June comes"

——that was what Mafuyu said.

The month before she disappeared,

we had refused to give in to each other, and kept butting heads.

We had our fair share of quarrels; we occasionally helped each other,

and I had seen her cry,

but despite all that, I was by her side the whole time—





蛸沢 真冬

Mafuyu Eoisawa

「見つからなかったら、
わたしの言うことなんでも聞く？」

高校入学前の春休み、ぼくは彼女と出逢った。

二年前に音楽界から消えてしまった天才少女ピアニスト。

なぜか人目を避けて部屋にこもり、エレキギターの超絶テクを練習してる。

……って、ピアノはどうしたんだよ？

CDのジャケットやテレビでしか見たことのなかった彼女の素顔は

あきれれるほどわかままで、口が悪くて、横暴で、とげとげしくて、

でも恐がりで泣き虫で、特別だけれど普通の、女の子だった。

If we don't find it, will you listen to anything I say?"

We had met each other during the spring break before the start of high school.

The piano girl prodigy who disappeared from the music scene two years ago.

For some unknown reason she avoided human contact and holed herself up in an empty classroom, practicing those extremely difficult electric guitar techniques—

.....Wait, what about the piano?

Her real personality, which can't be seen through her CD covers or on television—

is actually a girl who is hopelessly selfish, foul-mouthed, violent, and thorny, but at the same time, who gets scared easily and is a cry baby.

Though she is quite special..... she's about the same as any other ordinary girl out there.



高校に入ったばかりはクラス分けを見て愕然とする。

小中九年間、ずっと同級生だった幼なじみのこいつと、また同じクラス。

どこの神様が面白がってこんな腐れ縁にしたのかわからない。

気安くぼくのことを喋るからクラスメイトに「夫婦?」とか誤解されるし、

おまけにぼくを奇妙な部活に勧誘しはじめたんだ。

「つまらない人生がんばって。
ちよっとだけ応援してる」

相原
Chiaki
Aihara
千晶

"We still have to do our best even if life is boring. I'll root for you, just a little."

I was stunned when I saw the class assignments for high school. From elementary school to middle school, my childhood friend has been my classmate for nine whole years, and now, we're in the same class yet again.

Perhaps this is some sort of prank by some god out there, because he thought it'd be interesting for our unsavory ties to continue.

She's unreserved when she speaks to me, and because of that, our classmates mistakenly viewed us as a 'married couple.'

And on top of that, she started dragging me along to join some questionable club activity as well.



神楽坂 響子

Kyouko
Kagurazaka

「だから少年には、
私の恋と革命のために
死ぬ気で働いてもらう」

その奇妙な部活、民俗音楽研究部の部長がこの先輩。
自称革命家で、傲岸不遜に手足が生えてギター弾いてるような人だ。
気まぐれに見えてその実は策略大好き、ほくも何度もはめられた。
無駄な方向に人一倍行動力があるから、なおさら手に負えない。
可愛い女の子集めてバンド作りたいらしいんだけど、
なんでぼくに目を付けるの？

"So young man, you shall work till you drop for the sake of my romance and revolution."

As for the questionable club activity, this senior is the chief of the Folk Music Research Club.

A self-proclaimed revolutionist, she is a wild and unruly guitarist.

She seems capricious, and is really manipulative—I'm always getting tricked by her.

Since she always goes all out for every pointless thing, she can be really hard to deal with.

I heard she wants to create a band that consists of only cute girls, so why is she interested in me?



五月のはじめに、真冬と再会するまでは。

ぼくはといえば、機械いじりだけが取り柄のインドア派。
父親の職業柄、音楽に埋もれて育ったから、
聴くのは好きだったけど、
バンドなんか誘われても困る。楽器ほとんど弾けないし。
放課後は廃校舎のとある部屋を勝手に使って、
好きなCDを好きなだけ聴いて、
のんびりゆるゆる高校生活を送るつもりだったんだ。

桜川
Nao
Hikawa
ナオ

As for me, I'm just an indoor-type that only knows how to repair machines.

I grew up in a musical environment because of my father's job.

Despite enjoying listening to music,
it's really troublesome when Senpai comes to invite me to join the
band. It's not like I'm that good at playing musical instruments.
I'd secretly sneak into a derelict classroom after school,
and my original plan was to listen to my favorite music there as I
pleased,
and leisurely live out my high school life, that was it.

That is, until I met Mafuyu again in May.



Even if I lose things that are important to me,
after escaping from everything,
I am still not alone.

And because I am not alone,
I have the strength to walk to the ends of the world—
That's what I feel.

Chapter 1 - The Department Store at the Ends of the World

With the windows of the train pushed up just about five centimeters, the smell of the sea was already slowly drifting in.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and there were no other passengers aboard the train aside from me. There would be a lot of visitors heading down to the beach once the summer holidays arrived; but it was only early April, so there was still quite some time before the beaches would become crowded. Given that, the only people that would make a trip down to the beach during spring break would probably be middle school students..... and that included me.

The double-carriage train rumbled past a gentle turn. The walls of mountains and bamboo forests suddenly disappeared before my eyes, and my line of vision broadened, bringing with it the growing smell of the sea. The clusters of rooftops and the copper-rust-colored sea were darkened under the gloomy sky.

The train wobbled and stopped at a small station.

I grabbed my backpack from the luggage rack, and as I walked onto the open platform, I could immediately see a grey band in-between the dark-green mountains on my right.

I had no idea when it started, but the valley had turned into a huge dumping ground. I didn't know if the dumping ground was legal or not, but plenty of trucks from all over the place went there to dispose of broken electric appliances or furniture. And as time passed, that place became strangely silent. It was so quiet it felt as though you had been transported to fifteen minutes after the apocalypse—and because of that, an enclosed space had formed. The middle school I studied at was located close to the beach, and ever since I had stumbled upon that special place by accident after getting lost one day, I secretly called that place <The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>. I had borrowed that name from a certain novel, and even though it was long and unwieldy, it didn't matter,

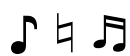
because I didn't plan on telling anyone about it.



My father has a weird occupation as a music critic (though that's really rude to other critics, I want to emphasize how uncommon my father's job is to me), and because of that, my house is filled with all sorts of sound systems, records, CDs, musical scores and other related items. My mother left the house about ten years ago because she couldn't take any of it much longer; and though I had no plans or aspirations back then, I had sworn to myself on the night that I became six, that I would never become a music critic.

But let's put all that aside for the moment. The equipment in our house are the tools of the trade; and yet, my father always handles them carelessly. He breaks everything—whether it's the speakers, the turntable or the DVD player. But when I was young, there weren't a lot of people who would buy toys for me, so I resorted to dismantling that broken equipment for fun; and because of that, I slowly learned how to assemble and repair things. Now, it's sort of like a half-hobby to me.

And because of the needs of my hobby, I visit <The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>, located next to the beach, once every two to three months to collect some useful parts, making my way down there via the wobbling train. It feels like I'm the only living person left in this world when I walk around the rubbish heap by myself, and that feeling is rather pleasant.



However, I wasn't the only person to visit the dumping ground that day.

As I walked through the forest, making my way towards the valley, I saw a mountain made up of abandoned fridges and scrapped cars that had been exposed to rain and shine. But surprisingly, I also heard the sound of a piano.

I originally thought I was hearing things, but as I stepped out of the forest and looked at the heap of rubbish right in front of my eyes, I realized I wasn't just hearing the sound of a piano. The low chords of

the bassoon were like the surface of the calm seas..... and the sounds of the clarinet came to me soon after.

I had no idea what the song was, but I had heard it before. It was probably a piano concerto from Nineteenth Century France. But why can I hear it here?

I climbed on top of the roof of a derelict car and began scaling the rubbish heap. The melody of the piano started turning into that of a march. I had originally thought that the sound of the piano was coming from a radio that still had some power left in it, but that thought vanished within seconds. The depth of the sound wasn't the same. It was definitely the sound of a live piano.

I looked at the basin after I reached the peak of the heap, and the sight that greeted me was so shocking it made me hold my breath.

A large grand piano was buried amid the cupboards and broken beds. Its lid was giving off a black glow, as though it were doused with water, and expanded outwards like the wings of a bird. On the other side of the piano, was a bunch of maroon hair that swayed along with the exquisite sounds of the instrument.

It was a girl.

That girl was sitting in front of the slanted keyboard, with her gaze fixed on her hands, and her long eyelashes slightly drawn back. Those penetrating and exquisite sounds played by her were like the raindrops of late winter, bouncing out drop by drop from within the piano.



I somehow recognized her face.

Her stern and pale white face was something that was out of this world. She was so beautiful I couldn't turn my sight away from her.

Her maroon hair shimmered like molten amber under the sun.

I've seen her somewhere before, but..... where?

I couldn't remember her name. And I couldn't recall the piece she was playing either.

There should be no one else around here, so I should only be hearing the sound of the piano and the gushes of waves filtering through the forest. So why? Why can I hear the sounds of an orchestra?

I suddenly noticed that the piano beneath me was giving off a tremble and a slight sound whenever she played the low notes with force. But it wasn't just that. The bicycle buried under the rubble over there, the rusted metal container, the broken LCD screens, everything—they were all resonating with the piano.

The rubbish buried in the valley was singing.

And those echoes stirred up my memories of the sound of the orchestra that accompanied that tune.

It was just an auditory hallucination, but it felt way too real.

I know that piece of music somehow, but what exactly is it?

Why—does it touch my heart so much?

The allegro march was like a flurry of footsteps flowing into the expansive estuary before dawn, which was the music at adagio. Countless tiny bubbles of notes flowed upwards from the depths of the sea to the surface, and gradually spread outwards. Then, the sounds of the orchestra rang from afar again, and should've continued on steadily—

But the music suddenly stopped.

I held my breath and looked down at the piano while I was stuck to the peak of the rubbish heap like a barnacle.

The girl had stopped playing, and was looking at me with an extremely stern look.

The illusory orchestra, the reverberations of the piano, and even the sound of the wind rustling through the trees—they had all disappeared, leading me to think, for an instant, that the apocalypse had really come.

"..... How long have you been standing there?"

She spoke. Her voice was clear, like the shattering of a wine glass on the floor. She was angry. I lost my footing and slipped from the fridge I was standing on.

"I am asking you, how long have you been standing there?"

"Urm, well....."

I was finally able to breathe after squeezing my voice out.

"..... Probably during the cadenza."

"The cadenza at the beginning?"

She sprang upwards, and her soft maroon hair fell down from her shoulders. It was only then I realized she was wearing a white one piece dress.

"So you have been listening since the beginning?"

I couldn't help it, alright! What did you want me to do then? Do an Indian dance while yelling my lungs out for you to see? As I looked at her red face and her fluttering hair, I slowly regained my composure. I did nothing wrong, it was just that someone had arrived earlier than I did, right?

"Sicko! Pervert!"

"No, hold on!" Why must I be charged with those accusations?

"To think you actually stalked me all the way out here!"

"Stalk..... Oi! I'm just here to collect some junk!"

The instant she slammed the key lid of the piano, something resonated along with it. The fridge that I was standing on suddenly gave off a violent tremble. It tilted slightly, and I slid down along with it.

"Whoaaaaa!"

I rolled away from the tilted fridge and the hood of the derelict car, towards the bottom of the basin where the piano was. My shoulders crashed into the leg of the piano.

"..... Ouch!"

Just as I was about to stand up, I realized her face was right in

front of mine. Her navy-blue eyes were gazing at me intensely. Shocked and unable to move, I could only stare at those lips of hers, which were gently quivering like the petals of a camellia.

"Why are you here if you are not stalking me?"

"Eh? Ah, no, you see....."

She knitted her brows. The mysterious magical powers that had been binding me weakened a little, and I finally managed to regain control of myself, and scooted backwards while still sitting on the ground.

"I said I'm here to pick up some audio parts! I actually do come here occasionally. It's not like I'm stalking you."

"..... Really?"

Why would I lie? Then again, does this girl suspect she is being stalked by someone?

"In any case, leave this place immediately, and tell no one about my presence here. You are to remove the memory of the tune you just heard from your mind as well."

"How is that possible....."

"You definitely. Cannot. Tell!" Her eyes were shimmering with tears, as though the stars were falling from the sky. Having witnessed that, I could no longer say anything else.

"I understand, I'll just scram, alright?"

I heaved my backpack onto my shoulders and began climbing up the rubbish heap. Then, cranking sounds of a machine suddenly echoed behind me, followed by her screams of "Ah! Ya!"

When I turned my head around to take a look at what was happening, I noticed a palm-sized tape recorder on the piano. It was giving off a strange sound. Could it be that she was actually recording this entire time.....? The tape inside seemed to be spinning back and forth. I couldn't bear seeing that worried look on her face as she held that tape recorder any longer, so I walked over and pressed the switch on the recorder.

"..... Is..... Is it broken?"

She asked, with a voice that was close to tears, as she carefully

lifted up the tape recorder and cupped it like an egg that was close to hatching.

"Ah, don't do that. You can't just pry open the recorder like that."

She quickly stopped herself from attempting to open the cover. I placed my backpack on the piano and took out a screwdriver. Her eyes widened when she saw that.

"..... Are you dismantling it?"

"Don't worry, I'll repair it carefully."

When I took the recorder from her hands, I realized it wasn't an ordinary recorder, but a double-track recorder and player. Not only could it play the A and B sides of a tape simultaneously, it could also record on them separately as well. But the labels on the recorder were printed in a language that I had never seen before, and it was obviously not English.

"What language is this?"

"Hungarian," she replied softly. European goods, huh. Can I really repair this?

After I unscrewed the screws and removed the outer casing, what appeared before me was an interior made up of parts I was familiar with. International standards are really useful.

"Can it..... be repaired?"

"Probably."

I lowered the lid of the piano to use it as a worktable and slowly began to disassemble the recorder. Just as I thought, the magnetic tape has been pulled out of the cassette. It was spewed out and had clustered into a bunch—just like the spewed out organs of a sea cucumber—so it took me quite some effort to remove the cassette.

"..... Hey, is this tape recorder defective to begin with?"

"Eh? Ah, mmm..... The tape will not stop spinning even after it reaches the end, so it will get even more tangled if you do not press the stop button."

I see, the automatic stopping device was already faulty.

"I-It is because your sudden appearance made me forget to press

it."

So it's my fault again? Just buy a new one already.

"Is this important to you?" Since she was still using it despite it being faulty.

"Eh?" She looked at me in surprise, then lowered her head and said, "Mmm."

Hungary huh. This girl shouldn't be Japanese then, or is she? The contours of her face make her look like a mixed-blood to me. As I thought that, I dug for parts in the rubbish heap. After finding the required pieces, I finally completed my surgery on the recorder. Whether it's rewinding the tape or fast-forwarding, it shouldn't go out of control anymore.

"And it's done."

"Eh..... Ah, mmm." Her face showed an expression of disbelief. But just as I was about to press the play button to confirm the recorder was working normally, she suddenly snatched it away from me.

"Y-You are not allowed to listen." She tweaked the volume to its lowest, then pressed the play button to confirm it was working properly.

"..... T-Thanks."

She hugged the tape recorder tightly, then thanked me with a tiny voice while hanging her head downwards with her face flushed red. For some unknown reason, I felt embarrassed as well, so I turned away and nodded.

Right when I was finished packing my tools back into my backpack, she suddenly asked, "Why do you bring so many things along with you?"

"I just told you I enjoy fiddling with machines. That's why I'm here to look for parts!"

"Then..... is that fun?"

Her sudden question caught me by surprise, and I was unsure of how to answer her.

"Hmm..... I'm not too sure if repairing a broken machine is

something to be happy about, but everyone seems really happy when they can regain something they thought they had lost."

As we exchanged glances, her face became red again, so she hurriedly turned her head away. As I stared at her side profile, I had a sudden impulse to bombard her with multiple questions. Why are you here? Or rather..... who are you? What was the title of the piece you were playing? And also, I want to listen to what you recorded, you know? Perhaps that orchestra I had heard wasn't actually my hallucination? I had thought of asking her all those things, but she probably would've just gotten angry again if I had actually asked her those questions.

She placed the recorder back onto the piano, then sat on a cupboard as a substitute for a chair and looked at her feet. I wanted to continue talking with her, but the atmosphere was no longer right, and I couldn't find an opportunity to speak. Forget it, it feels like she finds me troublesome anyway. I'll just head home for the day.

I probably won't meet her again the next time I come here, right? Or perhaps she comes here because there's no piano in her house? I thought about all these things as I prepared to climb up the rubbish heap. But suddenly, her voice rang out behind me,

"Urm—"

I turned my head.

She was fidgeting next to the piano. She didn't look angry this time around, but instead, was blushing due to embarrassment. "Do you live nearby?"

I tilted my head.

"..... Nope. It takes about four hours to get here by train."

"Then are you heading to the station now?"

She instantly showed an expression of relief the moment I nodded my head. She slung the recorder next to her waist and began following behind me, scaling the slope made up of huge rubbish.

"Are you going back? Then I can just stay here, right?"

"You can't! Just move, go on!"

What's with that.....

I maneuvered past the bumpy heaps of rubbish unhappily and slowly walked back towards the forest next to the valley. She kept complaining about how her feet hurt and how she was about to fall, but she still followed anyway.

"Look....."

I turned around and called out to her. She was startled, and fidgeted about three meters behind me.

"W-What?"

"Could it be that you've forgotten your way back?"

Since her skin is a lot fairer than that of a typical Japanese person, it was really obvious when she blushed. Though she shook her head furiously, it seemed like I was spot on. I couldn't help but let out a sigh.

"Well, I was lost the first time I came here as well."

One single step in the wrong direction on the path from the seaside to the station, was all it took for one to get lost.

"It is not my first time. I have probably been here three times already."

"So you still can't remember the route despite having come here three times....."

"I have already said that is not how it is!"

"Why don't you go back by yourself then."

"Uh....."

She gritted her teeth and glared at me. I had no choice but to cease arguing with her, and quietly continued walking out of the forest. On our way back, I saw a purple-colored truck pass us by. It was probably there to dump some trash. As the truck traveled farther away, the forest slowly regained its deep silence. The faint sounds of the truck, together with the sounds caused by the rubbing of tree branches, made me recall the rich ensemble of the piano concerto.

That was indeed a stunning experience that had left me breathless. But that miracle probably wouldn't have happened if this girl hadn't been playing the piano in such a special place. I stole glances at her

as I walked on ahead.

Then again, where exactly have I seen her before? Could she be a forgotten friend of mine? Why else would she be so brazenly willful in front of me?

That can't be, right?

If I had met a girl that could leave such a deep impression on me before, I wouldn't have forgotten her.

After walking to the small town located in-between the mountains and the sea, filled with plenty of ramps and slopes, a cluster of houses suddenly came into view, along with the train station. Almost all of the decorative lights on the archway of the shopping street were no longer lit, but the four-story-high building—a relic from the Shouwa era—still had a Glico advertisement board on its roof. How nostalgic. To the left, a sign with the JR logo, as well as the station's name, was hanging off the top of what looked like a prefab house. Aside from the both of us and a few stray cats scrounging for leftovers, there were no other moving things at the entrance of the soba shop.

"Here we are."

"I can see that."

That was all she said before she rushed to the entrance of the station.

I just stood there blankly and considered what I should do next, but I couldn't even call out her name. Can't help it. That was the first time I had met her, and she had asked me to forget all about her as well.

I should just head back to collect some junk.

I turned away from her, and just as I was about to leave, someone spoke,

"Hey you."

The voice belonged to a middle-aged policeman that was walking out of the small police station opposite of the bus rotary. It didn't seem like I was the one he was referring to though. She was petrified, and timidly turned around. The policeman went up to her

and asked, "Eh, ain't you Miss Ebisawa?"

"..... Eh? Urm, well....."

Her face was ghostly white from the shock.

"Ahh, I'm right. Even your clothes fit the description. Your family's looking for you, right? Seems like you came somewhere around here the last time you ran away from home as well. In any case, follow me. I'll contact your family members."

A runaway girl huh..... Seems to be a repeat offender too, so it's best that I don't associate myself with her. As I resumed walking, passing by the policeman, I could feel her staring at me, requesting my help. Damn, I still noticed it in the end.

It was as though her earnest and teary gaze was saying "I'll hate you for life if you don't help me."

Stop it, me. Ignore her.

But it was all too late. I'm not fit to be a human being if I choose to walk away silently after seeing that gaze of hers.

"Urm....."

Looking at the sweat-drenched back of the policeman, I spoke. He was about to take her back to the police station, and the expression on his face as he turned around seemed to suggest that he had only noticed my presence just then.

"I think you've mistaken her for someone else. You see, this girl here is on a trip with me."

"Huh?"

The policeman's expression became funny, as though he had accidentally chewed on a snail or something.

"Hey, let's hurry up. We'll have to wait for a long time if we miss the incoming train."

"Ah, uh..... mmm."

She scooted away from the policeman as I gave him a nod, and together, we briskly walked towards the train station. I didn't know if he had understood what I had said, but there was no point in sticking around either.

After purchasing our tickets and passing through the gates, we snuck a peek in the direction of the bus rotary.

"Will that work..... You'll play along if the policeman catches on to us, right?"

"I, I....." The girl held onto her ticket and shifted her sight away from my face. "I did not ask for your help!"

"Fine, I'll just get the policeman then. It's not good to lie."

The girl's face turned red. She didn't speak a word, but she did repeatedly slap my back.

"The next time you run away from home, choose a location where your parents won't find you!"

"That is not it! Things are not as you think....."

So it seems like I was the one acting like a busybody. It can't be that she actually hates me? Hey, I offered her my help!

She suppressed her anger and shot me a glare, then walked towards the platform linked to the Kudari line. The opposite direction as me huh. I was slightly relieved, but felt a small sense of pity at the same time.

Just then, the station played a tune signifying the arrival of the train. It was a very familiar tune—Mozart's [**<Twelve Variations on "Ah vous dirai-je, Maman">**](#).

"Ah....."

The bulb in my head lit up all of a sudden. I got it! I remembered who she was. Yeah, didn't the police officer say earlier that her family's name was Ebisawa?

"Ebisawa..... Mafuyu?"

She was about to take the second step up the stairs, but was so surprised she stopped completely in her tracks. When she turned around, her fair face was dyed red. Her pair of eyes was like the dark cloudy sky just before a thunderous downpour.

No wonder I found her familiar—I had seen her on CD covers before, as well as on TV. She was the piano girl prodigy that had become the youngest winner of the International Piano Competition held in Eastern Europe—at just the young age of twelve. Her debut

was met with a full house of applause as well. Ebisawa Mafuyu.

That mysterious lady had released quite a number of albums two and a half years ago, but she disappeared from the music scene at the age of fifteen.

And now, that mysterious figure was right in front of me, holding onto the handrail with an expression close to crying.

"..... You..... know me.....?"

Her stuttering voice was nearly drowned out by the railway crossing, but I still nodded my head slightly. Not only did I know her, I even remembered all the titles of the songs she had released.

"Yeah, I do. Because I have all your CDs, and....."

"Forget it all!"

"Eh?"

"Just, forget everything!"

I wanted to say something, but I could only watch as she ran up the stairs, her maroon hair fluttering behind her. Just then, the *ding ding ding* sounds that ring out during the lowering of the crossing barriers reached my ears; and for a while, all I did was stand there in a dazed state.

"—Hey!"

A human voice rang out from my side. I turned my head and saw a white silhouette on the platform opposite of me. We exchanged glances for a moment, then she, Ebisawa Mafuyu, swung her hands and threw something over.

A red object flew over the tracks. I extended my hands out in an attempt to catch it, but it hit my wrists and fell next to my feet. It was a can of cola.

The train then drove in-between us.

She stepped onto the train, and it left the station after closing its doors, leaving me all alone on the platform. The cola was rolling on the asphalt and was about to fall onto the tracks, but I picked it up before it was too late. It's still cold, so she probably bought it from the vending machine over there. Could she actually be treating this as a sort of thank you gift?

Ebisawa Mafuyu.

I had heard all her CDs before—though, obviously, I hadn't bought them myself. They had been given to my father for free, as he was a music critic. His collection of music increased by about a few hundred CDs each month, but her works were the only ones I never got tired of listening to. In fact, even the track order had left a deep impression on me. I enjoyed seeking out those unintentional glimpses of warm pulses amid that clear, steady and inanimate melody.

Then, my thoughts turned to the piece she had played at the dumping ground. That piece isn't on any of her CDs, right? If it was, I definitely would've remembered it.

What exactly did she face and encounter?

She didn't seem like someone that would play such a depressing tune.

Her last words kept reverberating in my ears—"*Just, forget everything!*"

I held the cola in my hands and sat down on a bench. Her voice, and that intriguing piano concerto, echoed in my head until my train arrived.



That was what had happened to me during my spring break before high school. That unbelievable coincidence.

When I returned home, I continuously played the <Twelve Variations on "Ah vous dirai-je, Maman"> that was performed by Mafuyu on her CD. And as I listened to that, I thought back on the incidents of that day and couldn't help but wonder if everything had just been a dream. Because there was no way that that junk could resonate to a piano, or give off the sounds of an orchestra.

The only evidence that could prove that everything that had happened was real, was the cola that she had given me, which exploded on me the instant I pulled open the tab. Man, you really can't shake or throw carbonated drinks. After wiping the floor clean with a piece of cloth, it felt like that only remaining sense of reality had disappeared as well.

Even if she didn't want me to forget everything, I probably would've done so anyway. I'm a busy man, and I can't even remember the dream I had two days ago.

At that time, I obviously had no idea I would be reuniting with Mafuyu again under *those* circumstances.

Chapter 2 - Flower Field, The Forgotten Music Room

There's a sort of relationship in this world that's a bit unsavory, and that was the type of relationship that Aihara Chiaki and I shared. Since our houses were located close to each other, it was only natural for us to attend the same elementary school and middle school. But to top it all off, for nine consecutive years, we were also in the same *class*, and even managed to get into the same high school. There might be some that might attribute it to our intelligence being roughly the same, but the problem was we had both been assigned to the Third Class of First Year. What can I say, our unsavory ties run extremely deep.

"Isn't this great? I'm poor at Math and English, so I can copy Nao's notes; and Nao's not very good with sports, but I am. Let's help each other from now on." Not long after the end of the opening ceremony, Chiaki said that to me while slapping my back with a *papapa* sound. The smell of wax still lingered in our classroom. You're good at sports, but how are you gonna help me with that?

"This guy's impressive. When you open his front door, you'll be greeted by a mountain of CDs, and then they'll all come tumbling down."

"Wow, why is that? Is his house a music shop or something?"

"Why have you been to his house before?"

Using me as a stepping stone, Chiaki had quickly blended herself in with the rest of our female classmates, whom she had only met not too long ago. She and I were the only two ones from our middle school that had enrolled in this particular high school, so there wasn't a single person we were familiar with. Her adaptability is really scary.

"Hey, what's your relationship with her?"

A guy who was quite interested in me leaned over and asked that in a whisper.

"Eh? Ah, it's nothing, we just studied at the same middle school."

"But didn't you help her tie her bow-tie prior to the opening ceremony?" Another guy suddenly spoke up behind me, causing my face to turn green from shock. They saw?

"Urm..... Well, that's because....."

"Really!? Oh damn! Are you two a married couple!?"

"Isn't that the opposite of the typical situation? It should be the girl helping the guy!" They're picking that sort of difficult-to-explain situation as a conversation topic. Damn, I hate Chiaki for that. I had taught her many times already—at the very least, remember how to tie your bow-ties yourself!

"Have both of you been together since middle school?"

When I shook my head a few hundred times to fervently deny it, all the guys around me suddenly heaved a sigh of relief. They pulled me away from the girls and moved our group into a corner of the classroom, then began to talk in whispers.

"Aihara Chiaki's one the few top-graded goods in our class! That's just great."

"I originally thought I liked girls with long hair, but I realize now that I was wrong."

I listened to the guys' assessments with a dumbfounded expression on my face, then looked at Chiaki's profile as she sat on the table, chatting away at the other side of the classroom. Her hairstyle back in middle school used to be extremely short and parted down the center, which made her look really fierce. But after she had left her club in the autumn of our third year, she had begun growing out her hair. Now, her short hair looks prettier and more feminine. But wait, the problem is..... "That girl has a volatile temper and is a beginner dan in Judo as well. Don't you think it'd better if you guys stayed away from her?"

"She's in the Judo club? Should I join as well?"

"Do we have a Judo club here?"

"Even then, most Judo clubs split up the guys and the girls."

"Why must they be separated? They should allow everyone to

practice *prone techniques* together!"^[1]

Can you guys listen to what others have to say?

She was no longer practicing Judo because she had sustained a back injury last year; but at about the same time our enrollment into high school was confirmed, for some unknown reason, she began learning the drums. But in the past, she had zero interest in music, and she couldn't have started practicing the drums by herself, right? As for her reason for wanting to be a drummer, this is what Chiaki told me—

"Back during the new year, when the doctor told me I could no longer practice Judo, I drank a bit of beer out of desperation....." The underage shouldn't be drinking! "And when I fell asleep in my drunken state, Bonzo appeared in my dreams."

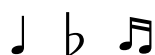
Bonzo was the drummer of Led Zeppelin; he died from suffocation when he inhaled his own vomit after puking in his drunken stupor. That doesn't sound very good. She didn't see his spirit in a state of near-death, right?

"And he said to me, 'All you have left is the drums.' Because Bonzo said that to me, I had no choice but to do it, right?"

"Was that really Bonzo?"

"I saw him continuously waving his hands at me as he stood in the flower fields near the riverside. It was Bonzo alright. His Japanese was really impressive too, though he spoke in Tsuguru dialect."

..... That was probably your deceased grandfather that had died last year.



It was only after entering high school that I came to know the real reason Chiaki started practicing the drums. Every day after school, she continuously pestered me about joining the Folk Music Research Club.

"But Nao has no other specialty other than music, right? Come on, just join us."

"You're meddling too much. Speaking of which, what's with the

Folk-whatever thing? There's no such club, right?"

I tried remembering back on the introductory booklet of the school clubs—which I had received during the opening ceremony—and the parade of people waiting at the school gates to recruit new students into their respective clubs. I don't remember seeing a club with such a complicated name. And speaking of music, I'm only knowledgeable at listening.....

"The so-called folk music actually refers to rock! If we openly call ourselves a rock band, however, the teachers would never approve it; and additionally, there's no way they'd approve the club if only Kagurazaka-senpai and I are in it. So please, join our club!"

So that's the reason for desperately trying to get me into the club huh.....

"Stop trying to recruit me into a club that's not even established yet! And who's Kagurazaka-senpai?"

"An awesome and impressive person from the First Class of Second Year."

After a careful round of questioning, all the riddles were finally solved. It seemed that Chiaki had met that Kagurazaka person during summer last year; and her entering this high school via recommendations, and her reason to begin drumming—it was all because of this Kagurazaka-somebody. What a joke. I grabbed my bag and walked out of the classroom. All our classmates were focusing their attention on us as we had that conversation. It felt really embarrassing. Chiaki chased me and said, "Wait for me! What's wrong with joining the club? You have nothing else to do anyway, right?"



"Even if I have nothing to do, I won't join that club."

"Why?"

"Because..... I wouldn't stay long anyway."

I had originally wanted to say "I was dragged into Judo training by you, and I gave up in a short span of two weeks—you already know that." But I didn't say it in the end.

"Really? Then what do you plan to do in high school?"

Study—but obviously, I couldn't bring myself to respond with such an insincere but politically-correct answer.

"Isn't your life just boring then?"

So your life's really interesting huh?

"Why do you care about whether my life's boring or not?" I said that without much thought. Chiaki suddenly stopped in her tracks. When I turned my head around, I saw Chiaki shift her sight away from me and look slightly downwards. What's happening now?

Chiaki turned her head away and asked, "..... What do you think my reason is?" I had no idea how to reply to that.

"Because you're really free as well?"

Chiaki's hands reached out for the collar of my jacket, and before I could even think anything, my body had already spun in the air and my back was slammed against the floor of the corridor.

"..... Oww!" My eyes were filled with stars; and for a moment, I couldn't breathe. Despite that though, I tried standing up, using my hands to support myself against the wall.

"Stop with those random shoulder throws of yours, alright!?"

"That wasn't a shoulder throw. It was a body drop."

"That's not the problem here! Are you trying to kill me!?"

"I~diot!"

Chiaki stomped on my thigh, then turned around and left. What was all that about!?



My main reason for not joining a club was an extremely negative one, like "finding it all bothersome." But aside from that, I had another reason that could be considered more positive—I had found

something to do after school.

After watching Chiaki leave, I went to the first floor and walked into a small courtyard past the school's back gates. Next to a rusty rubbish incinerator that hadn't been used in a long time, stood a long narrow building. It was shaped in a simple rectangle and made of cement, similar to the public toilets seen at the parks; and on the sides, there were several doors. Since it hadn't been used by anyone for quite a long time, the walls and doors of the building were covered with dirt, making it rather filthy. The private school often expanded for no rhyme or reason; and additionally, the number of students enrolling in the school was in steady decline. Together, these conditions resulted in an increased number of empty facilities and unused classrooms.

On my third day of school, I had discovered that I could enter one of the rooms on the left side of this building. Because I was just exploring around the school, I tried turning the handle. And after a *kra kra* sound, the door just opened. Later, I figured out that by pressing the door handle diagonally downwards to the right and turning it forty-five degrees, the lock would open.

In the room, there was a tall metal rack, a locker and an old study desk. The walls were lined with a sound absorbent material that had many equally-spaced circular holes in it. And from the marks left on the floor, one could deduce that this place had previously housed a piano. But now, the only thing that could be labeled as school equipment was a mini audio system next to the desk.

Actually, this high school was my father's alma mater. I had once heard from him that this school used to have a music club, but it was abolished not long after he graduated. He used to say half-jokingly, "My batch of students had poor conduct, so the school got rid of it." Then again, that might have very well been true.

There was a huge perk to having the sound absorbers there—I could bring a huge stack of my CDs into the room and listen to my favorite songs as loudly as I liked. It was a good way to kill time after school, and if I were at home, my father would definitely be blasting his classical music records, resulting in me not having a place where I could enjoy my music in peace.

Since the condition of the room wasn't too great, the sound proofing wasn't perfect. I had to stuff a towel in the gaps around the door before I could turn on the audio system. On that day, the first CD I listened to was the live album by Bob Marley, which put me in a reggae mood. I was probably being affected by what Chiaki had said.

"Isn't your life just boring then?"

I had never thought about that. Then again, it'd be quite a headache for me if my life was deemed boring just because I didn't join a club. Isn't this just fine—you can consider it to be a music appreciation club! And I'm not causing trouble for anyone either. Sure, I'm using this room without prior approval, but this classroom seemed to be out of use for a long period of time anyway. Plus, I'm also keeping the classroom clean; so as long as I ensure that no one outside can hear the music I'm playing, it should be fine, right?

Notes

1. 寝技 (*ne-waza*), techniques in Judo. Wiki to learn more

Chapter 3 - Lies, Bento, Partita

During early morning homeroom, when our teacher—nicknamed Retiree (because he looked like Mito Koumon)—brought that girl into the classroom, the atmosphere of the class instantly froze. At the time, I was snoozing while listening to my discman, so I didn't notice the change in the atmosphere.^[1]

It was only after Chiaki, who was sitting in front of me, had turned around and prodded my shoulder, that I hastily removed my earphones. Regardless of whether it was homeroom or not, the classroom would always be filled with chatter early in the morning. But, at the time, I could only hear a few of my classmates whispering.

"Hey, she is....."

"Yup, should be."

"Ebisawa—"

"Eh~? That very person? Didn't they say her whereabouts were unknown?"

I took a look at the lecture stand. My discman nearly fell to the ground. The girl at the stand wore her hair back, and because it was the same exact hairstyle as that seen in the advertisements, everyone recognized her instantly. It was, indeed, Ebisawa Mafuyu herself. She was wearing our school uniform, but it felt like someone was playing a joke on us. What's with this? I didn't catch what Retiree had said, and for a moment, I couldn't comprehend the fact that she was transferring into our school.

"Let's have Ebisawa do an introduction of herself."

Retiree said that leisurely and passed the chalk to Mafuyu. She pinched the chalk with only her thumb and index finger, and stared at it uneasily for some time. As her face turned pale, she spun around to face the blackboard; but in that moment, the chalk slipped out of her long slender fingers, and the unexpectedly sharp shattering sound broke the silence of the classroom.

An asphyxiating silence followed. Mafuyu just stared motionlessly at the broken chalk. Retiree was stroking his prized goatee slowly, and even though we had only been in school for a month, we all knew that that motion was a sign that he was uncertain of what was happening.

"Mmm, well....." Our teacher barely made a sound and picked up the chalk—which had broken in half—to hand to Mafuyu. But when Mafuyu took the chalk, her fingers were already trembling in full sight for all to see.

At last, Mafuyu looked at the floor and shook her head. She placed the chalk on the chalk holder.

"I do not want to write my name."

As she said that, it felt like the air in the classroom had been electrified. Wait, what exactly is that lass saying?

"It's just a name, so it should be fine, right?" Retiree said. He was speaking slowly and in a low tone; he was obviously at a loss at what to do, since his hands were fidgeting next to his thighs.

"I do not want to."

"Mmmmm..... Why?"

"I do not like my family's name."

Mafuyu's words had an effect similar to pouring liquid air into the already frozen classroom. I noticed Mafuyu's expression as she bit her lower lip. It was the same as on that day, the day we first met—the expression she wore when we parted.

But, of course, I didn't say a word. The one to save the day was a female classmate sitting at the front of the classroom.

"It doesn't matter, teacher. We all know her name already."

"Yeah. Her name's Ebisawa Mafuyu, right?"

"Yup—"

The atmosphere of the class suddenly became really strange. Whispers like "She's that pianist" and "I've seen her on ads" were shooting off one after another. I noticed Mafuyu's slender limbs were trembling slightly in response to the reaction of our classmates. I was, perhaps, the only one that had noticed the signs of danger.

"Ah, mmm, if so....." Retiree looked at Mafuyu and said calmly, "Ebisawa, do you have anything to say to your classmates?"

A girl suddenly raised her hand and asked, "May I ask when you'll be releasing your next album?"

I couldn't quite remember that girl's name, but I did remember her to be a chatterbox. That question spearheaded an onslaught of questions.

"Didn't you say you'd be studying at the College of Music?"

"There aren't any new advertisements with you in them. Why is that?"

Some of the guys who were still confused about the situation asked, "What advertisements?" "It's that insurance ad. You mean you don't know?" "Ah, that ad. I do." "Hmm? Really?" The classroom suddenly became noisy.

Mafuyu was looking at the ceiling with a stern face, and it was then that she suddenly spoke with a sharp, ringing voice.

"Please forget everything."

The silence that engulfed the classroom was like the frozen surface of a lake.

Mafuyu's strained voice continued to reverberate in the classroom—just like back then.

"..... I'll be disappearing in June anyway, so please forget me."

Not one person spoke after hearing Mafuyu say that, nor did anyone know what to say. The thing that saved us from our utter confoundment, was the bell that signaled the end of homeroom.

"Ah, i-is that so? Then..... Mafuyu, please take a seat over there."

Retiree pointed towards the back of the classroom, and as I came to my senses, I realized there was an unoccupied seat to my left.

"The class representative is Terada, so feel free to clarify any doubts you may have with her."

Terada was the very first classmate that had asked Mafuyu a question. Retiree then clipped the attendance records and the already bundled lecture notes under his arms, and briskly walked out

of the classroom.

Mafuyu gulped and regulated her breathing slightly. She then surveyed the classroom once with a hostile and wary stare, before quietly stepping down from the lecture stand. The classroom was dead silent. Everyone stared at her every movement as she walked down the aisle between the desks. Could it be that Mafuyu would disappear in an instant should the stares stop for a brief moment? Nah, that sounds incredibly stupid. It's impossible, but I still joined in anyway. Perhaps it was due to all the staring, but Mafuyu deliberately hid her face as she passed by my seat. The sound of footsteps suddenly stopped next to me—

"—Ah!"

She noticed. Mafuyu pointed her slightly shaking finger at me and shouted in shock, "W-W-Why are you here?" I hugged my head with my arms, and lay on the table. I realized that everyone in class had their eyes set on me. Give me a break.

"What? You two know each other?"

Chiaki looked at Mafuyu, and then at me. I repeatedly shook my head, as though I wanted to wipe the table clean with my forehead.

"No no no, I don't know her. She must've gotten the wrong person."

But Mafuyu said, "Why are you lying!?"

"You're the one who wanted me to forget you, right?"

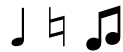
"See, you remember! I had asked you to forget me!"

Ahhhh..... I don't know anymore.

"Mmm, that's why I'm telling you, I've forgotten everything already. Who are you again?"

"Liar!"

I guess our conversation must've sounded really stupid. The discussions among our classmates were getting louder and louder, while Chiaki's curious stare became even more piercing. Second period was olden literature, which I hated the most, but at that moment, the sight of that old hag language teacher was like a saving grace.



Even if I factor in her unbelievably beautiful face and that celebrity status of hers, Mafuyu is the type of girl I don't want to willingly get close to. Every day since she transferred here, she had been surrounded by groups of curious girls, who bombarded her with questions. But, except for the occasional "Don't know" and "I do not wish to answer," she hardly answered any of the questions.

"Why did she transfer here at such a strange time?"

During our lunch break, Chiaki looked at the group of people and softly asked,

"Our school's just an ordinary high school, and she picked fine arts as her elective. So why?"

In our school, we have to pick either music, fine arts or calligraphy as our arts elective. Honestly speaking, it's rather strange for a pianist to not pick the subject she's good at.

"Just ask the person in question and you'll get the answer."

Chiaki shook her hands and said, "I can't break past that human wall that's surrounding her." She then took some stuff from my bento and devoured it with huge bites. Recently, I've been preparing more food in my bento, in anticipation of her grabbing a portion of it.

"Then again, when and where did you meet her?"

"..... In my dreams?"

"Wanna take a trip to the infirmary?"

"Nope. Man, explaining everything'll be difficult."

"There's still a long way to go before lunch break is over, so you can explain everything from the very beginning." Chiaki's eyes were giving off an unyielding look, despite her smile. As I was trying to avoid the topic, she finished my bento as quickly as she could.

Mafuyu continued her anti-social behavior during lessons, without caring the least bit about her studies; she didn't take notes and frequently dropped her textbooks on the floor. There were some teachers that didn't give her any special treatment, despite her being a transfer student, and immediately asked her to go up to the lecture

stand; but she insisted on remaining at her seat, replying, "I don't want to." To be honest, I thought she was really cool, since I couldn't have done that even if I wanted to. From what Chiaki told me, all she did during physical education was sit and look on from the sidelines.

During lunch break of the second day after her transfer, it seemed that Mafuyu was finding the situation of being surrounded by the curious girls to be slightly unbearable, and had sought my help quite a few times by looking at me pleadingly through the gaps of the human wall. Well, I can't help even if you want me to.

Most of the questions asked by the girls were mundane things like, what sort of place was the studio like, which celebrities were at the broadcasting company, and if she had met any of them. Just as I was about to pull out my chair to scoot away from the group of people, I heard someone slam the table with a sudden *bam*. I turned my head around and saw Mafuyu standing in the center of the group of girls, pointing at me through a slit in the human wall. She said with tears in her eyes, "Go ask that guy over there. That pervert owns all my albums and should know a lot about me."

Eh? What?

Mafuyu kicked the chair down, then ran past me and out of the classroom in a flash.

Countless stares landed on me. Class-rep Terada was the first to speak, "..... What's the relationship between this pervert and Ebisawa?" Why the heck are you calling me a pervert!?

"From the conversation you had with her, it sounded like you knew her beforehand."

"Yeah."

Damn that girl, she actually said something as irresponsible as that, just so she could run away from them.....

A certain guy said, "This dude probably knows her because his dad's a music critic."

"Ah, classical music, huh."

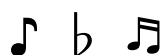
"Then you know her already?"

"Your dad should know plenty of things about her, right?"

"Ask a few questions when you get back home! Things like why Ebisawa chose to study at this school. Ebisawa refuses to say anything about herself."

I can't possibly know things like that, right? You guys think the world of classical music is small? Though I was thinking that, I gave an ambiguous nod to appease the crowd.

Despite being treated so coldly by Mafuyu, the class-rep still wished to talk to her. Was that the class-rep's kind attempt to integrate Mafuyu with the rest of the class, or was it due to her high tolerance born out of curiosity? I had no idea. Perhaps it was a little of both.



After returning home that day, I finally understood how small the world really was.

"Tetsurou, do you still remember Ebisawa Mafuyu?"

As I was preparing dinner, I threw that question at my father, who was in the dining room at the time. I'd already forgotten when I started calling my father by his name—probably sometime after my mother left home? I don't know why, but I could no longer treat him as my father shortly after that.

Tetsurou was squatting on the chair in his jersey. He was drumming on the bowl with his chopsticks, playing to the rhythm of Tchaikovsky's Waltz, which was blaring loudly from the speakers. He repeatedly shouted, "Dinner's not ready yet?" Is that how a man in his forties—with a son as well—should be acting?

"..... What'd you just say?"

Tetsurou turned his head around, but his hands continued drumming on the bowl. A sudden anger swelled up inside me. I snatched away the chopsticks and switched off the speakers. Tetsurou did nothing but pout like a kid.

"What I asked was, do you still remember someone named Ebisawa Mafuyu?"

"Hmm? Yeah, I do. Ebisawa Mafuyu, huh. Bach still suits her the best. There are some parts that don't flow smoothly in nearly all of

his partita, but that's the fascinating point about them. Occasionally, there's the emergence of a few youngsters who can play Bach's music amazingly well. Take for example....."

"Enough, I don't want to listen to your opinions on that."

Forget it. She's probably just one of the many pianists in Tetsurou's eyes, so it's understandable for him to only talk about things related to music. Just as I was walking back to the kitchen while thinking that, Tetsurou spoke yet again.

"But I heard she transferred to your school?"

"How did you know?"

I turned around in surprise and nearly fell after kicking the pot.

"Ebichiri and I are old classmates from your school. And since Ebichiri's the school's director, he would definitely force her to study there unreasonably."

"Ah..... right, she's his daughter."

Ebisawa Chisato—commonly referred to as Ebichiri—was one of the few conductors who were well known. He used to be a full-time conductor for the Symphonic Orchestra of Boston and Chicago and was a world renowned musician as well. Incidentally, Tetsurou was the one who gave him that nickname—critics are a really scary bunch of people.^[2]

One of the topics that were widely discussed during Mafuyu's debut, was that her father was "the world renowned Ebichiri." There should have been some who had tried to get the father and daughter pair to perform on the same stage, but Mafuyu disappeared from the music scene before any such performance became a reality.

"The thing is, our school no longer has music as a core subject, so why did she transfer here?"

"I heard it was due to the constant complaints from his daughter. It had already been decided that she'd be enrolling in the College of Music, but the daughter said she didn't want to. He was left with no choice but to allow her to study at a normal high school, and thus, she transferred to your school. She no longer plays the piano, right? I felt she was one of those destructive types of pianists after listening to her pieces for the very first time; her counter-melody

sounds like a quarrel among family members."

Hmm? But.....

I had heard her playing the piano that day at <The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>.

She..... no longer plays the piano? Why?

"Oi, dinner's not ready yet?"

"Dinner's~ not ready~ yet?" Tetsurou began to sing those words along with the tune of [<Non più andrai>](#) from <The Marriage of Figaro>. Damn, you're noisy. Go chew on your records or something!

If she really had given up the piano for some reason, and had chosen to enroll in my school instead of the College of Music at the very last minute, then the strange time of her transfer would make sense. Still, why did she give up the piano?

I shook my head and no longer wished to think deeper into it. Should they hear about the things my father just mentioned, my classmates would probably think I really knew a great deal about Mafuyu, but we're just classmates who sit next to each other. It seems that she has something she doesn't want anyone to know about, but because it'd be impossible for her to interfere with my life by her own accord, the only thing I can do is ignore it, right?

However, Mafuyu came barging into my life the very next day—
—in a totally unexpected way.

Notes

1. 水戸黄門, title character of a drama. Wiki if interested.
2. Ebichiri's actually [shrimp in chili sauce](#), and quite obviously it sounded similar to his original name

Chapter 4 - Stratocaster, Red Tea

When school ended, Mafuyu immediately disappeared from the classroom. Ever since her transfer here, her whereabouts after school had become the biggest mystery of the Third Class of First Year.

"Her shoes were still in the shoe cabinet, so I don't think she's heading straight home after school."

"Class-rep, when did you leave school yesterday?"

"Hmm— about five."

"I saw Mafuyu near the staff room."

Homeroom was about to start, but Mafuyu was nowhere in sight. A group of girls had gathered around her desk—which is right next to mine—and were exchanging information they had amongst themselves. Stop meddling in other people's affairs already!

"I thought she liked drawing since she chose fine arts as her elective, so I tried inviting her to the arts club..... but she ran away after saying some strange things to me. What's with that!"

"Speaking of which, that girl does nothing at all during the lessons, right? She just opens her sketchbook and leaves it there! Is there something wrong with her brain?"

"She should just choose music instead. She's causing a lot of problems for the teachers as well, right?"

Everyone's appraisal of Mafuyu was sliding down further as they continued talking, though that was to be expected.

"Perv, do you know anything about her?"

They suddenly involved me in the conversation.

"Can you please not address me like that....."

"Then how about 'Mafuyu's Exclusive Critic'?"

"Wow, that sounds like a stalker."

"I don't want that either."

"Then how about I combine both to make it 'Perverted Critic'?"

"Don't go combining things randomly!" Thanks to Mafuyu's baseless slander, I was facing a crisis in my life. "We only met once before the school opened, so I know nothing about her."

What's with those stares of disbelief!

The bell began ringing, but Mafuyu still wasn't in the classroom; Chiaki still hadn't arrived either, but that wasn't unusual. It seemed like she was practicing the drums somewhere every morning. The advantage of being a drummer is that you can practice just about anywhere, as long as you have a pair of drumsticks, a metronome and a stack of old magazines.

The bell finished ringing, but the moment the teacher started closing the attendance book, the door at the back of the classroom suddenly opened.

"I'm safe! I'm safe, right?" Chiaki shouted while dashing into the classroom. For some unknown reason, she was pulling Mafuyu along behind her. The silent Mafuyu put on a grumpy expression and flung Chiaki's hand away.

Our teacher was nice though, and said to them, "I won't consider you two late, so take your seats immediately." If Chiaki were alone, our teacher probably would've marked her tardy without hesitation.

"Sorry, but lend me your notes for a while. I'll copy them quickly."

Chiaki snatched my notebook after sitting down.

I looked at her back as she copied my notes furiously, and asked softly, "What were you two doing just now?"

"I was practicing in the corridors on the third floor, and I saw Mafuyu. It seemed like she was lost."

"I was not lost....." Mafuyu mumbled. I secretly cast a glance at her—she seemed slightly angry, and her face was quite flushed too. That means..... this girl actually has a really poor sense of direction? The school's quite big, but getting lost while trying to get to your classroom is a bit ridiculous, right?

"I made a detour to the music room, and on my way back....."

"Alright, I'm about to start the lesson, so you two stop your chit-chatting," the teacher snapped. Our classmates released a stifled laugh.

The music room? Why there? My doubts only lasted for a brief moment though, as the teacher suddenly called on me to answer the questions in our assignments. With that, the only thing I could do was focus on snatching my notebook back from Chiaki.



As usual, after school, I avoided Chiaki's attempts to rope me into the club. I made a trip down to the library to return some books I had borrowed, then headed towards the direction of the abandoned classroom behind the main building of the school. Just as I turned the corner of the building—with the chimney of the incinerator coming into view—the faint sounds of an electric guitar drifted into my ears.

It came from the classroom I had been using, and suddenly, I thought, "Did I leave the room with a CD still playing?" Shit! But as I approached the door and listened, I realized that wasn't the case. From within the classroom came a tune that I hadn't heard before, but I was very familiar with the melody all the same.

Liszt's [**<Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2>**](#).

This is an extremely difficult piano solo. During the endearing friska, the tune is accompanied by notes that are played repeatedly at blazing speeds; moreover, what I was listening to was the [**guitar version**](#). What's this? I don't have such an amazing CD..... no, wait, this is live—so there's someone playing it right now, with the electric guitar plugged into the amplifier that I had modified.^[1]

I couldn't help but develop goosebumps. It was impossible for a tune like this to be played by one person alone, even if he possessed four hands. However, the melody that was flowing into my ears definitely came from a single guitar. So who could that person be.....?

I grabbed the door handle.

Just then, that grand piano buried at the dumping grounds

appeared in my mind.

I pushed the handle down diagonally and turned it at the same time. *Kacha*—I heard a muffled metallic sound and could feel the sensation of the lock coming loose through my palms. Just as I opened the door, the music came to a screeching halt.

Mafuyu was sitting on the long desk and looked at me with a stunned expression. Her varnished guitar nearly slipped off her legs. I guess my expression then was probably the same as hers.

Why—is Mafuyu here? In my classroom—which I'm using without permission—and holding onto a guitar? What the heck is going on here? When and how did this dream start? Could it be, that everything that dated back to my encounter with her during the spring holidays was just a dream—

"..... Why?"

Mafuyu regained her senses a tad bit quicker than me and spoke first. I took a small leap backwards in shock.

"Eh? Ah, no..... wait, stop, you'll kill me if you hit me with that guitar of yours!"

Mafuyu's face was flushed red, and she swung that slightly heavy Stratocaster of hers at me as she chased me. I slammed the door shut to escape from her.

"..... Why are you here? Pervert! Stalker!"

Mafuyu's shrieks slipped through the gaps around the door. Wait, I should be the one asking that question!

"I've been using this classroom all along, so why did you enter by yourself?" Though I was also using it without permission.....

"I..... I obtained permission from Miss Mukoujima before entering."

"Eh?"

Miss Mukoujima Maki, though everyone called her Maki. She was a young music teacher who everyone found approachable and yet, scary, at the same time. I see, so that was her reason for going to the music room in the morning? No, wait, why was she given permission to use the classroom? That means if I had asked the teacher for permission, I would've also been permitted to use it?

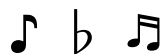
"Just scram already!"

That was what she was saying, but I had already moved in a huge stack of my CDs, refitted a component amplifier, and even prepared some cushions—I had wasted so much effort to make this classroom as comfortable as possible! Even if you want me to disappear, you can't possibly expect me to say, "Alright, so be it," and obediently leave as I was told!

"..... Eh, what's happening here? Why would the teacher....."

She didn't reply. Instead, the sound of a huge claw scraping against the walls could be heard—it was feedback from the electric guitar. Stop that, or else the amplifier will break down!

All I could do was sigh and move away from the classroom door.



Back in the school building, a surge of anger swelled up inside me as I walked through the corridor. That was obviously my territory—she came later, but there she was, sitting in there comfortably. Who could possibly accept that? If that's the case, I'll complain to Miss Maki. However, the anger died down in me as I approached the doors of the music preparation room. A huge poster of Ohtsuki Kenji was pasted on the sliding door—could Miss Maki be a fan of the rock band Kinniku Shoujo Tai? Also, was it fine for her to paste such a thing openly on the entrance of the staff room?^[2]

I had a staring contest with Ohtsuki Kenji as I tried to calm myself down. I could faintly hear the relaxing melody of a concert band practicing next door—it was the **background music** of the simulation game <Take the 'A' Train>.^[3]

Regardless of what you say, you've also used the classroom without permission—should I complain to Miss Maki, then I'd get in trouble as well.

Mmm, even so, if you want me to just back out like that, then—

"Yes? Looking for me?"

I jumped in shock, as a voice suddenly came from behind me, and my forehead slammed into the face of Ohtsuki Kenji. I turned my head around and saw Miss Maki standing behind me with a light

smile on her face. She was wearing a white blouse and a mini skirt, and because she was so disturbingly suitable for that type of attire, the students secretly called her the "Erotic Teacher." She was the reason the first year guys who had chosen fine arts or calligraphy as their electives, lived in regret. However, after attending her lessons, it was the guys who had chosen music as their elective that ended up with the deepest regrets.

"Eh? Ah, nothing."

"It's fine, just come on in. I was thinking of having tea. Want to join me?"

With that, Miss Maki dragged me into the preparatory room.

The music preparatory room was only about half the size of a normal classroom. As there was a shelf filled with musical scores, as well as an upright piano, the place was pretty cramped.

"Oh, there's hot water in the teapot, and the teabags are in the drawer. Also, cut a slice of honey cake while you're at it."

So you're relegating all the tasks to me?

"Ah, just a cup of tea will do, and slice the cake into three pieces."

"Eh? Miss Maki's not having any?"

"What are you talking about? It's for me, of course. I never mentioned anything about you getting any."

What else could I say?

"If you are dying for some tea, I can let you suck on those tasteless used teabags."

No thanks. Ahh, I wanna go home already.....

Miss Maki patted me on my back and said that it was just a joke. I was finally able to sit on a chair after I was done preparing two portions of tea and cakes. Just then, Miss Maki suddenly said,

"You're here to talk about the music building, right?"



I nearly spat out my sip of tea.

"H-How did you know?"

"Ara ara. I know everything already. Like how you've been using the classroom without permission for two weeks; how you've modified the CD player to link it to an external input-device; and how you've fixed the reception cables for the radio..... and how the cushions are really comfortable to sit on....."

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

I was honestly considering if I should just hide under the table or something. No wait, if I did that, I'd just get slaughtered by Miss Maki.

"But since you cleaned up the place really well, I turned a blind eye to it. I'm the only one who noticed anyway."

"Sorry sorry, I won't do it again."

"Since Mafuyu can use the classroom straight away as it is, the timing is just perfect."

I released my arms that were hugging my head, and looked at Miss Maki's face.

She said while laughing, "You're here to complain about that, right?"

"No..... I'm in no position to be complaining anyway."

"It's fine with me if you want to use it. I can't reject you after granting Mafuyu special permission to use that room. You two should try to get along well with each other."

"No, that's quite impossible."

Speaking of which, I was totally confused about the situation.

"Could it be, that Miss Maki and Mafuyu already knew each other?"

"Yes. I was a student of her father, and I used to play with Mafuyu all the time."

Miss Maki's expression was slightly lonely.

"As for Mafuyu..... something happened, and she ended up transferring to this school. She then told me she wanted a room she could use by herself. This is just the Director's daughter being willful, but since she isn't causing problems for anyone....."

"I see....." So the staff had silently agreed to it already.

"So you can use that classroom too, if you are willing to share it with Mafuyu."

So ultimately, I was the one who was chased out!

"But, why is she playing the guitar? I heard that she no longer plays the piano, is that true? She was originally going to the College of Music, right? So why did she transfer to our school?"

"I can't be the one to tell you all that....." Miss Maki's expression immediately became serious. "..... Moreover, she herself doesn't want anyone to know. To be honest..... I think it's better if she doesn't do that, but ultimately, the decision lies in Mafuyu's hands."

I didn't have the slightest idea of what was going on around here, and Mafuyu didn't explain anything to me either.

Because of that, the biggest problem facing me was what to do about that classroom. If it were the case that the school had found out I was using the classroom without permission, and angrily banned me from using it ever again, I would've given up immediately. But, if you want me to sit next to Mafuyu and listen to my CDs as she plays the guitar, there's absolutely no way I could do that, no matter what!

"Why don't you try talking to her, to see if you two can share the classroom?"

"But she was trying to smack me to death with that guitar of hers when I tried talking to her?"

"You give up really fast! How can a youngster be like that?"

After a sudden round of reprimanding from Miss Maki, I was finally allowed to leave the music preparatory room.

Notes

1. I found a vid done in electric guitar, so there you go. I think Mafuyu's version is probably crazier than that though.
2. I guess everything that you may want to know can be found via [here](#) and its

links.

3. not quite sure if the linked music is it, but it probably is. Game's A列車でいこう.
Quite a nice tune btw.

Chapter 5 - Toccata, Padlock, Revolution

To be honest, I hadn't told Mafuyu something—there was a major problem with that classroom: the gaps around the door. The soundproofing in the classroom wasn't perfect, so sound still leaked out of the room; and because of that, a rumor about how "a very impressive guitar solo could be heard from the courtyard after school" had spread throughout the school a few days later.

"Which piece? Is it that <ちゃらり ~鼻から牛乳~>?" ^[1]

"I've heard that before too. I'll get dizzy if I listen to it for too long."

So it's actually Bach's <Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV 565>. That lass really likes Bach, huh? It wasn't time for homeroom yet, so I listened half-heartedly to the broadcast of the girls' morning gossip, while recalling the pieces Mafuyu played.

"She played <Farewell> yesterday too. It was so~ very fast. Originally I couldn't figure out what piece it was." ^[2]

"Ah, so that's <Farewell>?"

I had heard the guitar version of <Farewell> as well. Chopin had initially composed the piece to be played at a very fast tempo—roughly four times the speed of current day interpretations—so in a certain sense, Mafuyu's performance was actually the correct version. I wanted to say that, but everyone would definitely call me a perverted critic or a stalker, so I chose to remain silent. Wait, what's with this? Are the critic-genes from Tetsurou doing something weird in my body? Stop that immediately!

Our teacher opened the door before the school bell finished chiming, and Mafuyu followed behind him. The whole class suddenly sank into silence. Everyone briefly exchanged looks with each other before returning to their own seats as though nothing had happened. The only one unaware of the situation was the very person herself. Even so, it seemed like Mafuyu had sensed that something was going on. As she walked to her seat, she looked at everyone with a

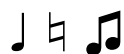
puzzled glance.

"Wanna go listen today after school?"

"Then I'll have a listen before my club activities start—"

I heard people whispering that and noticed a few guys sneaking glances at Mafuyu while grinning broadly. It had been less than a week since Mafuyu's transfer, but the number of girls who would try starting a conversation with her had nearly dropped to zero—she was probably being treated like a rare creature by everyone.

However, that had become quite a problem for me as well. That place was actually my relaxation room, and yet, it was occupied by someone else. Seems like I'll have to snatch the classroom back from Mafuyu's hands.



I came up with a really despicable plan to lock myself in the classroom to shut Mafuyu out. When math—which was the sixth period of the day—was over, I immediately grabbed my bag and rushed out of the classroom after bowing goodbye to the teacher.

However, I was dumbfounded when I arrived at the old music block at the back of the building. There was already a padlock hanging on the door of the classroom. Damn her, how dare she do that to my (self claimed) room!

While staring at the lock before me, I remembered the paper clip and the flat-blade screwdriver stored in my bag. Don't underestimate the skills I've acquired from modifying sound systems since I was young—a long, thin wire is all I need to settle a lock of such low caliber. No, that'd be considered a crime, right? Speaking of which, it'd be game over for me if I were seen by anyone while trying to pick the lock open anyway. However, if I do it quickly, it'd probably take less than a minute..... "What are you doing?"

A voice suddenly came from behind me. I nearly jumped three meters up in fright. As I turned my head—

It was actually Mafuyu. She was totally furious, and her maroon hair looked as though it were standing on her head.

"You criminal, you must've been thinking about picking the lock,

right? Please do not come close to me ever again."

That is indeed the case, but on what grounds do you have the right to scold me?

"Why are you always following me?"

How mean. So she herself is treating me as a stalker too? Stalking is a criminal offense, so I might fall into trouble should she actually file a complaint against me. Looks like my life's in a very terrible situation right now.

"No, look..... I've always used this classroom, and that amplifier was modified by me too."

I explained while trying my hardest to hold myself back.

"You were just using it without permission!"

"But Miss Mikoujima gave me permission to use the classroom too....."

"This is a room for practice, not a place for you to laze around and waste your time while listening to CDs!"

Mafuyu pushed me aside. She opened the lock, walked into the classroom, and shut the door. I froze on the spot and thought for a few seconds. Then, without a second thought, I barged into the room, opening the door forcibly as though I was trying to tear it down.

"Stop treating me like an idiot who's wasting his time. Life is all about wasting time till a person dies."

"Then why don't you just die already?"

Did she just say something extremely cruel to me?

"Can't. If I die, my mother and little sister would be very sad." I allowed myself to talk nonsense. "I already know the only family you have is that useless father of yours." What's with that retort? Damn, has this lass read Tetsurou's articles already? That stupid dad always mentions me in those articles of his. For example: "The way this conductor handles adagio is as slow as my son when he makes potato salad." However—

"I do admit he's useless, and you're free to see him as an idiot if you'd like. However, the person who will be troubled by all these

comments is me. Apologize right now—mainly to me!"

"The very existence of critics is troublesome. They always write rubbish."

Oi oi, what's with this? Mafuyu's expressions suddenly turned solemn, and she looked close to crying. Then again, why am I arguing with her in a place like this!? Upon considering that, my mind quickly cooled down.

"They are not the ones playing the pieces. All they do is listen frivolously, then talk nonsense, like what you are doing right now."

"Urm, well....." Talking nonsense is actually a fault of mine—I had originally wanted to say that, but after thinking deeper into it, I realized it would be a really feeble retort. Therefore, I could only shut my mouth.

"..... It's just guitar. I can play that too!"

Those words came out of my mouth unintentionally. They weren't nonsense though.

As a guy who listens to all sorts of rock, I used to play the guitar as well; though, that was something I did during the summer of my second year of middle school. I found a dusty classical guitar in the storeroom of my house back then, and used it to fervently practice the prelude to [**<Stairway to Heaven>**](#).

However, I no longer touched it anymore.

Mafuyu narrowed her eyes, and her gaze became cold. Her expression looked as though she was saying, "I bet that's just you sprouting nonsense anyway."

Just as I was about to say something again, Mafuyu suddenly picked up her guitar, which was leaning next to the table, and plugged it into the amplifier. She then walked to my side and forcibly put full-sized headphones on my head.

"Wha.....?"

"Don't move!"

She gently grabbed the pick with her two fingers and strummed the strings of the guitar. I suddenly fell into the flow of the melody. Amid the strong discords, those ever-changing descending notes came

gushing out like the waterfalls at the top of a cliff. What followed next was the grand, yet eerie, arpeggio arch, as well as a well-polished melody that encompassed the stamping of feet along with the dance—both of which were rising up from beneath the valleys.

That's..... Chopin's [**<Étude Op. 10, No. 12>**](#)

A storm raged on in my mind, but it was forcefully interrupted by the sudden cadence.

I was left dumbfounded. Mafuyu pulled the headphones off my head, and the sounds of reality slowly crept into my ears. My heartbeats; the sounds of me breathing; the sounds of engines on a faraway road; the cheers of the baseball team as the players ran to the bases—each and every sound I heard just seemed so unreal.

Mafuyu bent down and stared at me, as though she was saying, "Does your 'playing guitar' sound something like this?" There was quite a heavy silence.

"..... Can you still say, 'It's just guitar. I can play that too,' after hearing that?"

I remembered her giving a sigh as well.

I had originally wanted to say, "Stop treating me like an idiot," but I really could not say it convincingly.

"I've already said it. Get out. This is a place to practice."

"What's the big deal with playing a musical instrument?" I complained. "So you're saying if I bring a guitar here, I'll be able to use this classroom too?"

"Don't mimic me if you lack the ability to do so. Scram!"

While I was at a loss at what to do, Mafuyu pushed me out of the classroom.

Not long after, another piece flowed through the gaps from behind the tightly shut door. It was Chopin's [**<Marche Funèbre>**](#) from [**<Piano Sonata No. 2 in B ♭ minor>**](#). Is she deliberately looking for a fight? No wait, she doesn't know the sounds can be heard from outside the room, right?^[3]

Damn.

I pressed my palms against the door as my head drooped

downwards. For a while, I allowed the sounds of Mafuyu's guitar to seep into my body. It gradually turned into an unbearable pain, but I found myself unable to leave that place.

I was thinking—why guitar?

Just play your piano honestly. If you did so, I could've listened to you playing the piano while naively thinking to myself, "Though she's young, her techniques are really quite brilliant." Why did you have to step into my world? Nearly all the pieces that you're playing are piano pieces, right? What sort of prank is that!?

Don't mimic me if you lack the ability to do so.

I recalled Mafuyu's words. My shoulders slumped unwillingly, and I retracted my palms from the door. Compared to the sublime techniques of Mafuyu, no one could possess skills within the acceptable range, regardless of who he was. It was especially so for me, since I gave up guitar after just three months of playing.

Can't be helped. It was a classroom I was using without any prior permission, since it was quite alluring to be in an environment where I could listen to my favorite CDs at full blast without needing to wear full-sized headphones. However, that's all there was to it. I won't feel particularly troubled without it.

Just as I turned around, about to make my way back to the main building—

"Young man, you're giving up already?"

A voice suddenly came from behind me.

I jumped in shock and quickly turned my head backwards. What came to my eyes was the sight of a girl in her uniform, half kneeling right above the door—on the low roof of the music classroom. She was wearing a huge, fearless grin. I couldn't move an inch, and could only look at her motionlessly.

..... W-Who's that person?

She had a set of pretty facial features, with eyes that were giving off a horrifyingly sharp gaze. She was like a female cat that had escaped from the exceptional well-to-do environment—like those found in Egypt or in royal families—in which she was raised. I took a look at the color of her lapel pin, and confirmed she was a second

year student.

"Are you gonna run away, looking all crestfallen, right after you've been taught a lesson by her? You'll become a true defeatist like this, you know?"

"Urm, well....." My numb legs could finally move—I moved backwards a little. ".....what are you talking about?"

That girl then hummed a song. It's Ray Charles' <Born to Lose>.

"Born to lose. Don't you think this song exists just for you?"

"We are all born to lose. Isn't that how it was all along?" No wait, why am I answering her? I should run away. Things are not looking good. I better not get close to people like her.

She gave a hearty laugh.

"So young man, you're actually quite good with your retorts, aye? I feel slightly relieved. Why don't you draw out your weapon? Your country is being ravaged by the enemy."

Thud thud She said that as she knocked her heels against the door of the practice room. Why must I allow myself to be criticized by you like that? Then again, who the heck are you?

"Mafuyu should've played it to you just now. Chopin's <Étude Op. 10, No. 12>—<Revolutionary Étude>.



She said that with her index finger outstretched. I nodded with a "Mmm." Then, I suddenly remembered something—

I was wearing full-sized headphones, right? How did she know?

That violent smile of hers could've caused even an elephant to faint.

"I can hear all the revolutionary songs of this world."

She nimbly jumped off the rooftop, and that long hair of hers, braided behind her, floated in the air like the tail feathers of a majestic wild beast. She silently landed between me and the door, then straightened herself immediately.

"I wish to make Mafuyu my comrade. Therefore, young man, I am in need of your help. Please assist me."

No, stop. I really have no idea what the heck you're talking about—

"My name's Kagurazaka Kyouko."

Kagurazaka. I'd heard that name somewhere before. I began to search my memories.

Oh right, Chiaki mentioned that name to me before.

Kagurazaka-senpai stretched out her hand towards me.

"The Folk Music Research Club welcomes you as a member."

Notes

1. It is roughly translated as '[Cyarari ~Spitting Milk from the Nose~](#)', and the thing can be seen via the link. Thanks to Alice for pointing the vid out, cause I had no freaking idea what it was.
2. I guess the piece is more widely known as <Tristesse>, but <Farewell>'s the lesser-known name (in the english community at least) that is used in the novel. To quote wiki: '[Neither "Tristesse" \(sadness\) nor "Farewell" are names given by Chopin.](#)'
3. That's the funeral march, btw

Chapter 6 - Funeral, Meeting, Funds

"So you're saying you bumped into Kagurazaka-senpai?"

The following morning, in the classroom, Chiaki asked me that question as she stared at my face.

"Oh, yeah," I replied in an annoyed tone, "Though I think it was more her waiting for me than me bumping into her."

"Then..... are you joining the club?"

"Why would I!?"

"Because Senpai is the sort of person..... who will definitely get her hands on whatever she wants."

Kagurazaka-senpai said the exact same frightening thing to me yesterday in the courtyard. In front of the practice classroom, with her index finger pointing towards me, she declared, "If it's something I want, I'll do anything in order to get it, by fair means or foul. It doesn't matter if it's Ebisawa Mafuyu, this room, or you."

After she said that, Chopin's funeral march sonata could be heard coming from the practice classroom, and it just so happened to be at the part of the final movement, where the whirlwinds are raging through the cemetery—for a brief moment, I felt like dying.

Stop reminding me of those horrible things! Despite my efforts to forget, Chiaki caused those scary memories to resurface in my mind.

"I heard..... that she had always wanted a guitar that cost a million yen. And so, she went to work for the music store where the guitar was sold, and managed to grab hold of the store manager's weak..... urm, she became close friends with the store manager, and ended up getting the guitar for free."

"What the heck are the police for!?"

"Since Senpai could get that guitar in her hands, Nao should be an

instant kill for her."

So you mean I'm not even worth a million yen?

"To be in the same club as that sort of person—I really don't get what's going on in your head"

"But Kagurazaka-senpai is really cool!"

Hmm..... she might look cool if I were looking at her from two kilometers away.

"It isn't that bad to want to marry Senpai, right?"

"Alright, go ahead! But since Japan doesn't recognize same-sex marriage, go to Canada to get married instead! You know, Canada!" And don't ever come back!

"But both Senpai and I don't know how to cook. Why doesn't Nao come along as well?"

"What does it have to do with me!?"

As I said that to Chiaki, the backdoor of the classroom opened, and Mafuyu stepped into the classroom. The preparatory bell just happened to ring at the same time, as though it were reminding everyone that they were still in a classroom. Mafuyu stared at me with the sides of her eyes, then proceeded to take her seat silently. At that instance, I stood up irritably and walked out of the classroom.

A series of footsteps could be heard following behind me.

"What's with you?" Chiaki chased after me.

"I'm going to the toilet! Don't follow me."

"I heard from Senpai..... that you were defeated by Ebisawa?"

I stopped in my tracks. The bell that signaled the start of class rang, and the students that had gathered in the corridors became swallowed up by their classrooms. In the end, the only people left were Chiaki and I.

"You can't quite consider that a defeat."

"Didn't she say..... those who don't play musical instruments are not allowed to get close to the room..... making you run away?"

"If you think you can provoke me with those words, you're dead

wrong! Don't underestimate my lack of drive!" Hearing those words come out of my mouth, I couldn't help but pity myself.

"Nao knows how to play the guitar, right?"

"You can't count that as knowing how to play." And more importantly..... I had thrown away the guitar I used back then, so I'm currently not in the possession of any guitars.

"It's fine if you start practicing again! Senpai's very good at guitar, so you can ask her to teach you."

"If that's how it is, why don't you ask Senpai to directly invite Mafuyu into the band? She found out Mafuyu's really good at the guitar, and wants to acquire that practice room along the way, to use as the clubroom, right?"

I don't think any of those things have anything to do with me at all! I just hope they'll leave me alone.

Chiaki became quiet all of a sudden..... shit, that look of hers suggests that she's on the verge of crying and smacking me at the same time. But why? Did I say something to make her angry?

"..... Do you not know why Senpai is inviting you? Do you really think you're just a supplementary item alongside Ebisawa?"

Chiaki's words sounded as though they were being squeezed out by force.

"..... I. Don't. Know!"

I couldn't help but cower, taking a few steps back as well. My back slammed against the wall of the corridor.

"Nao, you huge idiot! At your funeral, I'll say 'Nao's life was really boring!'"

With that said, Chiaki dashed back into the classroom.

I walked into the toilet with a heavy heart and sat on the toilet cover. What's with that!

It'd be great if I knew how to play the guitar, but..... if only I could squeeze out some motivation after hearing Mafuyu play the guitar. I sat on the toilet bowl with my arms hugging my knees. The sound of the bell came. I didn't move an inch..... it was the first time I had skipped lessons..... and it had only been a month since the start of

school— isn't it a little too early for that? This is my very first step on the path to becoming an utterly useless high school student!



In the end, I obediently returned to class during the second period. I'm a person who gives up halfway through anyway, and I didn't have the guts to step into an arcade. Moreover, third and fourth period were physical education—it'd be scary to face the teacher if I skipped his lessons.

Halfway into lunch break, I walked towards the old music building, thinking I should just remove all my stuff from there. As I stepped into the courtyard, I could hear the sounds of the guitar; it felt like those sounds were directly blending up my brain. So that lass plays the guitar during lunch breaks too? Sigh, I thought to myself that I should just come another time. Just as I was about to head back, my sight was drawn to something placed next to the door of the room. That's..... a rubbish bag for disposing of trash that can't be burned. What exactly is in it?

I got close to the rubbish bag and peeked inside; a burst of anger lit up within my heart. Inside the bag was a huge amount of CDs—The Beatles, The Doors, Jimi Hendrix, The Clash—all of them are from my important collection! How dare that girl do this! I cranked open the door forcibly, slamming the door open. The sound of the guitar began assaulting me, but disappeared just as quickly.

"..... Didn't I say already, you are not to enter as you please!"

Mafuyu was sitting on the cushion on the desk and hugging her guitar. Her eyebrows were standing as she said that, but I wasn't about to retreat just yet.

I lifted the rubbish bag and protested angrily, "What are you doing!?"

"The cabinet's too small, so I just took them out of the room."

"Who do you think these CDs belong to?"

"If they weren't yours, I would not have tossed them out!"

I was furious to the point that I couldn't come up with a reply. What's with all that!

"Oi, since you're playing the guitar, you should respect the great pioneers of the rock genre!" And you should respect my private property too!

"I do not listen to rock or whatever, nor do I know anything about it. These things are an eyesore and a waste of space, so take them back quickly!"

Mafuyu pushed the dumbfounded me out of the room and closed the door. What flowed into my ears next was Beethoven's **<Piano Sonata No. 12 in A-flat Major>**. Yet another funeral march!? That must be deliberate, right!? Just then, a fast-talking melody suddenly appeared in my mind. I ignored the funeral march for a moment and concentrated my thoughts..... Chuck Berry!

<Roll over Beethoven>.

She dare say they're a waste of space? She hasn't even listened to them before! I've sacrificed half of my boring life listening to rock, and yet, she's belittling it? I had originally wanted to hammer the door of the classroom in frustration, but thought otherwise in the end. There were better things I should be doing with my hands.

I hugged the rubbish bag as I headed back to my classroom. As I stacked the CDs on my desk, one by one, I started to think of ways I could beat Mafuyu up..... though, of course, I wasn't really planning to punch her. The guys of the class came over. "You setting up a booth with all these CDs?" "All of them are western music." I wasn't paying much attention to them, despite them saying a lot of things.

What should I do.....? How should I teach her a lesson? It's decided, I shall show her the greatness of rock. However, I can't just toss the CDs at her forcefully, so—

I finally managed to locate Chuck Berry's album from the huge stacks of CDs. After slotting the CD into my discman, I stuffed the earphones into my ears.

The afternoon lessons of that day were spent listening to his songs.



I dashed home after school, but forgot to open the door gently as I entered the house; as a result, the CDs in the house came crashing down on me like a landslide. I stacked the CDs back nicely, then removed my shoes and walked into the corridor. The works of Bruckner could be heard coming from the living room.

"Tetsurou, I have something to discuss with you!"

I opened the doors of the living room. Tetsurou was sitting on the sofa with the laptop resting on his knees. He was typing out his article at a great speed, banging hard on the keyboard—the laptop should be a goner soon.

From the speakers came the battering of the timpani, and Tetsurou typed on the keyboard with a *darararara* along with the tempo of the music. It seemed like he was oblivious to the fact I was already back home, so I switched the music off without mercy. Tetsurou slid down from the sofa.

"My son, what've you done? The thing that irritates me the most is when the symphony's cut off at the third movement—didn't I tell you that before?"

"As a middle-aged man who has had the third movement of his life interrupted, do you think you have the right to say that?"

"Whoa, my lil' Nao, where on earth did you learn those dirty retorts? Daddy feels really sad....." I read them from your damn critiques!

"Alright, you should occasionally listen to what I have to say, okay? Stop lying there, sit down properly— don't do a seiza on the laptop! Do you want to crush it?"

After a roar of anger and a round of scoldings, I finally made Tetsurou sit in a position where he could listen to me.

"Do you have something to discuss with me?"

"Yup. I'm calling a family meeting."

"What's wrong? I currently don't have any intention of remarrying! But if it's with a girl like Chiaki, I may consider it."

"Stop with your daydreaming, you criminal! There isn't a second person in this world who's interested in marrying you! And that's not

what I wanted to discuss!"

"What do you want to buy then?"

Tetsurou's tone became serious all of a sudden, and that caused me to get tongue-tied for a while due to my shock.

"There's something you want, right?"

"Urm..... yeah."

I sat on the sofa after calming myself down.

Naturally, I'm in charge of our household's finances, but that doesn't mean I can spend them as I please. I have to arrange a family meeting if I want to buy something expensive.

"I..... want a guitar."

"Isn't there one in the house?"

"You broke it back when you swung it about during the baseball match! Don't you remember!?"

Is a person like him, who doesn't treasure his musical instruments, even qualified to be a music critic.....?

"..... Doing it for a girl?"

Tetsurou asked that suddenly.

"Eh? W-What?"

"There can only be one reason for a guy to want a guitar all of a sudden. It is so that he can be popular with the girls!"

"What's with that bullshit? Apologize to all the guitarists in the world right now!"

"I'll be casting a rejection vote if you don't admit to it honestly." I could say nothing. Why is he such a pain in the ass!?

"How much do you think a guitar costs? It'll cost at least fifty to sixty thousand yen for you to get a decent one, right? You only have about twenty thousand yen that you're free to use, isn't that right?"

"Why're you so damn clear about things like this?"

I pouted and sank myself into the sofa.

"Why don't you earn some cash for yourself! Just write a few articles for me."

Tetsurou pushed the laptop on the table in my direction.

"No..... I don't wanna do that again." I pushed the laptop back. I had helped Tetsurou with some of his articles back when the deadlines were approaching. I had originally thought it was impossible for the articles written by a middle school student to be published in an official music magazine, but little did I expect, the editor actually used them. It was probably due to Tetsurou editing them a little or something? Speaking of which, is that magazine really alright? Since then, my articles were frequently published in magazines or on CD covers, and Tetsurou would pass the royalties for the particular articles onto me.

Even so, the cash earned from the articles I wrote didn't translate completely into pocket money. Tetsurou said that thirty percent would be mine, while seventy percent would be incorporated into the family expenses. I tried protesting once, saying, "Why can't I use the full amount of cash that I earned?" and he replied with, "Because it's the same for me!" I couldn't argue with that, so as a result, I have to hold a family meeting if I want to buy things that are out of my budget.

However, there'd be no need for me to hold family meetings like this if I wrote more articles under Tetsurou's name. Then again, what should I do about the music magazine that hasn't once realized it was publishing articles written by a middle school student.....? But if I wrote more articles, it'd be at least two months before I could receive the royalties; and I wanted to purchase the guitar immediately, so I could begin practicing right away.

"The responses to the articles you had written were all rather good. You have indeed inherited my skills—how amazing! It just so happens I've only managed to write two lines since this morning, so help me out a little!"

Please don't say things like me inheriting your skills. I'll never help you write articles again!

"If you don't wish to help, you'll have to admit you're buying the guitar so you can be popular with the girls! If not, I won't agree to you buying it."

"Why do you have to be so insistent on that!"

"Because you started learning the guitar once before, but gave up on it immediately."

I hugged the cushions and fell silent. Tetsurou always hits the nail on the head once in a while, amid all his jokes—I think that must be a very bad habit of his.

"It's true, but....."

"That's why, if a guy's doing it to be popular with the girls, there's no problem at all! Just admit it. And this time, you must resolve that, if you give up halfway through, you'll never get a girlfriend for the rest of your life!"

Those words of his sounded quite stupid, but they were somehow extremely convincing as well. I took a brief moment to think about what he said in silence. For girls, huh—all of this was indeed started by Mafuyu, but it's more the case that I wanted to teach her a lesson.....?

"..... Fine. I want to play the guitar so I can be popular with the girls. Just cast your vote of agreement already!"

"Whoa, to hear such a stupid line coming from the mouth of lil' Nao—Daddy feels really sad~"

"Tetsurou, you're in no position to be saying that!"

I raged and threw the cushion at Tetsurou, but he unexpectedly grabbed the laptop and used it as a shield against my attack.

"Just joking! Remember to write my name down when you make the payment, or else they can't wire the bill to me."



My anger subsided after I tossed the newspapers and a half-eaten banana at Tetsurou. I went back to my room and sorted out my thoughts while lying in bed.

I've never been to a proper musical instrument store before. They do put some guitars on display at music CD stores, but I have no intention of getting a half-assed one from there. However, it would feel strangely uneasy if I were to deliberately look for a musical instrument store on the streets. Also, if possible, I wanted to get a

guitar that was cheap.

After thinking about it for a long while, my phone rang—it was Chiaki's phone number. If I start the conversation by talking about wanting to buy a guitar, she'll definitely make me join the Folk-whatever club, so I'll just skip that for now.

"—Nao? It's a little too early for you to be home, you coward."

"How's that cowardly? Right, there's..... something I'd like your help with."

"A request? What's wrong? I'll listen, but the price of me helping you will be you joining our club."

"No way. Look, do you know any decent musical instrument stores?"

"Musical instrument stores? Why?"

"To buy an instrument, obviously. I wanna buy a guitar."

I regretted it a little, but I still told her the reason. As expected, she insisted on getting to the bottom of the matter.

"Why, why? Did you dream of someone? Eric Clapton?"

I'm not you! And also, Clapton's not dead yet!

"Could it be..... the things Ebisawa said to you?"

I was speechless for a moment.

"Ah! Silence. I'm right~"

"..... It's not that—"

"Ehh, Nao and Ebisawa—"

At about the same time, both of us swallowed back our words halfway through our sentence. A moment of silence followed. I could hear the announcement for the arrival of the train from her side of the phone—she probably made the call at the train station while on her way back or something? Chiaki finally said,

"Right, since I'm about to head home now, let's go together?"

"Urm..... you don't have to. Just tell me the place, and I'll go there myself."

"Ah, it's fine. I'm a regular there, so it'll be cheaper if we go

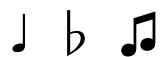
together."

"Thanks, but....."

"Oh! Here comes the train. See you at the station."

She hung up before I could say what was on my mind. For some unknown reason, her voice sounded strangely hoarse. I felt slightly uneasy, but I still took fifty thousand yen out of the envelope that held the money for our family expenses, and put it in my wallet before stepping out of the house. Prior to me mounting my bicycle, I placed my hand over my heart and confirmed it once again.....

It was still hot. That was not just a moment of impulse.



To get to the musical instrument store that Chiaki showed me, you'd have to exit through the northern entrance of the train station, then head downwards via the bridge till you hit the flight of stairs at the very end. After walking down the stairs, the store's located right at the intersection point of the shopping street and the slightly deserted residential area. It was sandwiched between two large buildings and looked a little like the spine of a thin book. A signboard with the words 'Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store' hung above its entrance. The shop was rather narrow, but guitars decorated the two side walls, from the floor right up to the ceiling—that made the shop look quite intimidating. The music playing in the store was heavy metal from Northern Europe, which further added to the sense of intimidation.

Chiaki told me before entering the store, "I'm a regular here, so if you try your best to haggle, you'll definitely get a cheap and satisfactory price." I don't have much experience in haggling though, so I wasn't feeling too confident about it.

"But, why'd you decide to play the guitar again? You were still very unmotivated this morning."

So she still asked in the end.

"Hmm—I just felt like playing all of a sudden."

"Do you think I met you just yesterday? You're not the sort of person who does things on a whim, but..... whatever. Hello~"

Chiaki grabbed my hand and walked into the store. Even the floors were filled with guitars, supported by display stands. I strolled past those guitars and walked inwards. Finally, we found the counter amid the heaps of CDs and scores—for some strange reason, a sense of nostalgia hit me.

"Is the store manager around?"

As Chiaki said that, a man walked out from the door behind the counter. His messy hair was swept casually to his back. He should be young, but that tired look of his was quite a pitiful sight—it was as though he were a potato that was left on the side for three weeks after it was picked from the fields.

"Oh, it's Chiaki. Sorry, but I'm quite busy here....."

"Well I'm sorry, but he's just a normal customer. This guy wants to get a guitar."

Just as Chiaki was about to pull me in front of the store manager, another person appeared at the door behind the counter.

"Store manager! The strings in stock don't match up at all—mmm?"

"Eh? Senpai's working today?"

I was stunned as I stood between Chiaki and the counter. Kagurazaka-senpai was wearing the store's green apron—with its logo printed on it—and was holding onto the logbook. How? Why is she here?

"Ah, Comrade Aihara. We're conducting a check on our inventory today, but there was a sudden lack of manpower. Speaking of which, we meet yet again, young man. How nice. Make up your mind quickly and join the club, yeah?"

"Urm..... ah, no..... ugh, why?"

Which reminded me, Chiaki did indeed mention that Senpai had worked at a musical instrument store to get her guitar..... So she was actually talking about this place? I should've thought of that..... Damn, I've been had! This is a conspiracy!

"Take your time! This is my store, so you don't have to hold back."

"Urm, it's my store....." The store manager made a feeble protest.

"Store manager's store is my store, right? Speaking of which, the numbers for Martin's Extra strings in the inventory don't match up at all. Did you place them somewhere else?"

"Ah, no, about that..... I won't know that if the Chief's not around!"

"Store manager, you're totally useless....."

The store manager looked like he was on the brink of tears.

"There's nothing I can do then. Young man, I have some time to spare, so I'll assist you with your shopping. Need anything?"

"Eh? W-Well, I'm not here to buy anything." I wove a lie on the spot.

"He wants to buy a guitar. What do you recommend, Senpai?"

Chiaki interrupted. There was no point in me trying to lie my way through.

"Hmm. What's your budget, young man?"

"Well....."

"Oh, it's quite a huge sum! About fifty thousand yen."

"Don't take my wallet without my permission! And don't look at the contents either!"

I snatched my wallet back from Chiaki's hands.

"Fifty grand, huh..... you can only buy the cheap stuff here with the amount of cash you've got, but that'd be a total waste of money."

"Don't say that....." the store manager curled himself up as he said that. I had no idea what his name was, but I was beginning to pity him already.

"Young man, how about this then? We'll play a game of rock-paper-scissors. If you win, I'll sell you a guitar that's slumbering in the warehouse and worth a hundred grand, at only half its price. If I win, I'll pick out a guitar for you that's within your budget. How's that?"

"Hold on a second, Kyouko. How can you be so rash?" The store manager was flustered.

"You said half-price, huh..... but is that fine?"

"No worries. It's clearly stated in the first chapter of Das Kapital: people sell their labour-power to a buyer, not to satisfy the personal needs of the buyer, but to augment the buyer's capital."

"I don't quite get it....."

"To put it in simpler terms, it means that most of the instruments here are sold at an exorbitant price, so they'll still earn a profit even if I sell them to you at half price."

"Kyouko....." the store manager was close to tears.

"Store manager's too irritating, so let's play our game outside. Young man, are you gonna accept my challenge or not?"

Kagurazaka-senpai grabbed my hand and pulled me outside of the store.

Though it was really pitiful for the store manager, what Kagurazaka-senpai said made sense too. Or rather, it's a little too good to be true, since I stand to lose nothing.

"If the price for selling me the guitar cheap is me joining the club, then I'm heading back."

"There's no need for me to impose any conditions, yeah? Moreover, I don't think I'd ever lose to a born loser like you." Damn, she's really blunt.

"Alright, I get it. You'll be selling me a decent guitar regardless of the outcome, right? You won't be giving me defective goods or something?"

"Of course! I swear upon the name and reputation of the store!"

"Well..... alright."

"Ready? I'll give you a handicap."

Kagurazaka-senpai flashed a smile of satisfaction and revealed something pinched in-between her index and middle finger. That's..... a guitar pick. Eh? Index and middle finger?

That means she won't be throwing scissors? No wait..... is that a trap? She's misleading me to lure me into a trap? "Rock—Paper—Scissors!" I simultaneously matched the shouts of Senpai, then immediately threw out rock.

Senpai's fingers expanded outwards to show paper—the pick slipped out of her hand and fell to the ground.

".....Young man, you're quite the honest man."

She gently patted my head. That's too sly! Actually, rather than saying Senpai was sly, should I be blaming myself for easily falling into her trap? As Senpai displayed a smile of victory on her face, I could see the store manager behind Senpai heaving a sigh of relief.

"Well then..... I'll be heading to the warehouse to find the best guitar that fits your budget."

I calmed myself down a little and squatted down on the spot. Chiaki came to my side and said,

"Nao's really weak huh."

"Shut up....."

"You lost the moment you agreed to the challenge."

I lifted my head, and after seeing Senpai take a metallic grey guitar out of the warehouse, I finally understood what Chiaki meant.

"This Aria Pro II costs fifty-four thousand and six hundred yen, including tax. Well, it's exactly fifty grand if I round it down for you."

"Urm..... there's only four strings?"

"Hmm? Don't you know? This is a bass. It has two fewer strings than a normal guitar, and its pitch is an octave lower."

"No, I know that much. But why are you selling me a bass?"

I'm here to buy a guitar!

"Bass is part of the guitar family, right?"

"Urm, well, but—"

Chiaki placed her hand on my shoulder and said,

"Because the Folk Music Research Club lacks a bassist—that's how it is. You understand now?"

It took me two seconds to process that, before I realized in shock—I had fallen into her trap. That girl's motive, all along, was to be able to choose the guitar that I'd be buying, and thus, she promised me that I'd be able to get a guitar regardless of the outcome. The

idiot who didn't see through her ploy..... was me.

"W-Wait....."

"I'm not interested in the words of a loser. Need a receipt?"

Kagurazaka-senpai flashed a smile as she said that. So she actually has a cute side to her as well—

"I've never thought of playing the bass....."

"Well, you don't know how to play the guitar in general, right?"

My weak protest was quickly rejected by Senpai.

"Also, you want to issue a challenge to Ebisawa Mafuyu with a guitar, right?"

"Ugh....."

I was speechless for a brief moment.

"That girl can play Chopin and Liszt with just a single guitar. Young man, based on your current skills, there's absolutely no chance of you beating her with a guitar!"

It's not really a challenge or anything, just—

"But you can win if you use a bass."

Kagurazaka-senpai shoved the heavy bass into my arms—

"I'll make victory yours."

Notes

1. Here's a fun fact: Tetsurou was never once illustrated in the five volumes of the series. My mental image of him while I was reading the book is a guy who looks like Jintan's dad (Anohana), but that was not what the author had in mind. In the author's notes of the final book, Sugii said that the editor had once asked him what Tetsurou looks like, and the author replied with "A grown up L (from Death Note)". The editor never asked anything about it ever again.

I hope I have permanently shattered the image of L in your minds. Enjoy.

Chapter 7 - Towel, Insecticide, Sealing Tape

Compared to the electric guitar, an obvious advantage of the electric bass is that, unless it's plugged into an electrical source, it can barely be heard.

I bought the bass under Kagurazaka-senpai's persuasions and brought it to class the very next day. My classmates instantly surrounded me. "Just play something, anything." Despite everyone urging me to play, I still gave the excuse, "But this is a bass, so it can't play any sounds!" and escaped. That wouldn't have worked if it were a guitar, so it's great that I had gotten myself a bass—with that thought in mind, I could also console myself slightly for being played at the hands of Senpai.

"But why'd you want a bass?"

A guy asked me something I hadn't really given any thought to.

"Ah, I've been thinking about it for a while. Besides, there's no real need for a reason, right?"

"Hey critic, you better explain it in simpler terms."

"Don't call me a critic!" I took the bass back from the hands of my classmate and placed it back in its cover. Actually, there was no way to properly explain it to them through words alone, but for the sake of the reputation of all bassists in the world, I had to come up with something.

"The few of you, sit over there."

"Yes, Prof Nao."

"Please don't use musical terminology during your explanation."

Ugh, they had actually thought of everything prior to my speech. The few guys sat in seiza around my seat, so I couldn't say anything wrong at a time like this. What to do? I licked my lips and thought about how I should begin my explanation.

"..... Well then, let's start by recalling Retiree's face."

"Why?"

"Don't ask. Just do as I say."

A few of the guys closed their eyes, while the others stared at the ceiling. As he looked like a carbon copy of Mito Koumon, it was really easy to recall our tutor's face.

"Next, try removing the goatee off his face. Done?"

"..... Right, done."

"Ah, that looks like Enari Kazuki when he was still young."^[1]

"Enari is still young, alright?"

"Right right. Next, imagine Retiree without hair."

"Prof Nao, is there any meaning to this? Is this some sort of psychological test or something?"

"You'll know soon enough. How is it? Can you guys imagine it?"

"I can, but isn't Retiree's hair quite robust?"

"Compared to the goatee, it's still easier to remove his hair."

"And here's the last step. Remove the contours of his face and imagine what he looks like."

Everyone's face was showing an expression like, "Eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't understand!"

"What do you mean by contours? The ears and stuff?"

"No, not that. It's removing the shape of his face. Imagine his eyes, nose and mouth popping out of a blank surface. Yeah, imagine that."

My classmates moaned sounds of "Hmm, hmm....." one after another. Some of them pressed their fingers against their temples, while others pulled their hair out.

"..... Can't, it's impossible. It's pointless if you remove the contours of his face!"

"No matter how hard I try, that round head of his always appears in my mind."

"Try harder. You're always proudly declaring, 'In my mind, I'm able to remove the swimsuits worn by those beautiful gravure idols, regardless of who they are!' right?"

Urm, you guys don't have to try *that* hard, you know?

They struggled for about two minutes before giving up, and with that, I presented by case,

"Now, interpreting that exercise in a musical context, the bass is like the contours of a face to me. Understand now?"

My audience still looked very confused.

"It's just like how you guys can imagine songs being played without the guitars or even without other instruments, but not without the bass. Similarly, I can't quite explain why the bass is that important to me."

"I see....."

"Strange. It feels like I understand what he's trying to say, but, at the same time, I don't."

So do you guys get it or not? Then again, it'd be disturbing if you guys did, because I was just spouting nonsense.

"But Prof Nao's really impressive. You have the potential to succeed the arts of your father."

"There's no way I'll be inheriting that!" Why must I allow myself to be told that by my classmates?

And with that, the preparatory bell rang. At the same time, the backdoor of the class—the door closest to the rear of my desk—opened.

Mafuyu stood by the door. Her line of sight first landed on my desk, which was surrounded by several of the guys, then shifted to the guitar cover in my arms. Her face suddenly cringed.

"..... Move."

A soft and cold word from Mafuyu was enough to cause the guys, who were listening to my nonsense, to move out of her path..... Oi oi, don't come to my desk, just go back to your seats already!

"Prof Nao....." One of the guys brought his face right next to mine

and whispered, "Is that it? Is Ebisawa the reason you picked up the bass?"

"Eh? W-What?" My voice became rather strange.

"You've been going to the courtyard frequently these days, right?"

"I see, so he'll be able to get close to her with that bass of his? That's quite smart of you, Prof!"

The guys stole peeks at Mafuyu's face. Don't gossip when you guys are that close to her!

Because of Mafuyu's hostile attitude, just two days after she transferred here, nearly all the girls in the class had become her enemy. However, none of the guys seemed to mind, and actually continued to worry about her. The ones who showed her the way when we were moving to another classroom, or who lent her their textbooks when she forgot to bring them—it was always the guys.

The guys always gathering around my desk are probably all doing it for the same reason. Guys are really stupid.

"Oh right, Ebisawa....."

One of the brave fellas turned around and spoke to Mafuyu. Mafuyu shifted her gaze from her textbook to his face and slowly said, "Please do not call me by my surname."

"Then—Mafuyu....."

"Don't call me by my name either. It's disgusting."

"Mafuyu called me disgusting..... My sole reason for living has been extinguished."

"Don't worry, your face isn't as disgusting as you think."

"Right, my face. Wait, what are you implying?"

Move somewhere else if you guys wanna do manzai. Speaking of which, she did mention it on her very first day here, but does she really hate her surname that much? I had always thought she was just lying, given the circumstances of the situation back then. But why? Did someone bully her in the past and give her the nickname 'Ebimayo' or something?^[2]

"So Ebisawa plays in a band too? Will your piano teacher be mad

at you for playing the guitar?"

As he was talking to her with an unyielding spirit, the side profile of Mafuyu froze.

"Then again, you're really good at managing your time, since you can practice two different instruments at once."

"She should be practicing at the same time, I guess? Since the pieces are the same."

"How's that possible!"

Mafuyu shifted her sight back to the textbook. However, I noticed her gaze was slightly blank.

"How did..... you people know?" As she spoke with her head hanging low, the guys gradually quieted down.

"Urm..... Well....."

"You've been practicing in the courtyard after school, right? We can hear you all the time."

"Ah, it's really famous! Everyone knows about it."

Mafuyu suddenly stood up. Her lips were trembling, and her face was turning green.

"I could be heard..... this entire time?"

Oh, shit. She didn't know? As I turned sullen to brace myself for what may transpire, I softly interrupted,

"Well..... I didn't tell you this, but the soundproofing of that classroom isn't perfect. Sounds can escape through the gaps around the door."

Mafuyu's face became ghostly white in an instant, then turned red. Her lips were trembling nonstop.

I hugged my head and laid it on my desk, in anticipation of her incoming fist, but all I heard was the sound of footsteps running away from me, followed by the sound of the door closing.

An uncomfortable silence shrouded the whole Third Class of First Year.

I lifted my head. Everyone pretended to not know anything, but their gazes were saying I was responsible for all that.

"..... Nao, what are you waiting for? Chase her!"

The guy who had lost his reason to live because Mafuyu found him disgusting, said that to me coldly.

"Why me?"

"Because you're in charge of Mafuyu!" Class-rep Terada said that for some unknown reason, and the girls around her nodded their heads in unison with a "Mhmm!" Wait, I'm in charge? What's with that?

"Get moving, before the lessons start! Hurry!"

I had no idea what they were planning, but there's something in this world known as the atmosphere of the situation, something that's hard to resist. Caught up in it, I stood up from my seat.

When I exited the classroom, I nearly bumped into a panting Chiaki as she ran towards me.

"What are you doing? I saw Ebisawa not too long ago....."

"Where did she go?"

"Eh? Ah, hmm, she was just walking down the stairs—Nao? Wait! Nao, where are you going?"

The preparatory bell rang at about the same time I pushed Chiaki aside to run away from the classroom.



Mafuyu had locked herself in the special classroom in the courtyard. Though the door was shut tight and no sounds were coming from inside, I knew it the moment I entered the courtyard, as the padlock hanging on the door was opened.

I stood before the old music building and began to sort out my thoughts. What am I doing? I went along with what my classmates wanted and came out to find Mafuyu, but what should I do? Should I apologize to her? What exactly did I do wrong?

I should just head back to the classroom and tell my classmates, "I don't know where she went," and let things be as they were. However, my legs couldn't move.

Soon, the second preparatory bell rang. I'm surely late for classes now. Forget it, I might as well skip first period! It shouldn't be a big deal to miss a lesson or two occasionally. Moreover, there were things that I'd like to say to Mafuyu as well. I grabbed onto the handle and pressed it diagonally downwards with force.

Mafuyu had stacked three cushions on the table and was sitting on them with her hands hugging her knees. When I walked into the classroom, all she did was lift her face up from her knees.

"It's a waste to use the cushions like that. I brought three of those cushions here so I could lay them out on the desk, side by side, and sleep on them. I'm not joking, so don't stack them up together like that."

Mafuyu didn't change her posture much, but did lift herself slightly to pick out two cushions with her left hand, before throwing them at my face. I threw one of the cushions back and placed the other on the floor so I could sit on it.

"What are you here for?"

Mafuyu asked with a hoarse voice.

"I came here because I want to skip the lessons, but I never expected someone else to be here. Whoa, what a coincidence—though I'm slightly troubled by this."

"Liar."

How do you know I'm lying? Show me proof! You know, proof! But you're right—I'm lying.

"Why..... didn't you tell me?"

Mafuyu stared at the floor and asked in a whisper. I turned my head backwards to glance at the gaps around the door, which were responsible for the improper soundproofing of the room.

"Well, it's because you never asked!"

I was hit by an incoming cushion yet again. Why are you angry at things like that?

"There's nothing bad about the sound going out anyway. It's not like you're doing something to be ashamed of."

"You're wrong."

Mafuyu tightly hugged her knees close to her chest and curled herself up in a corner of the desk. I can't communicate with her. What should I do?

"You had released CDs of you playing the piano, but you're not willing to let others listen to you playing the guitar? Isn't that really strange?"

"What do you know?"

Mafuyu threw a question that fell softly between us.

All of a sudden—a surge of anger swelled up from within me.

"How *would* I know!" I turned my sight away from Mafuyu. If I didn't do that, I don't know what Mafuyu would've done should she exhaust her supply of cushions to throw at me. "It's because you won't say anything, isn't it? Just honestly say whatever is troubling you, because I don't know how to read minds!"

It was the same back when we first met, and it happened again on the first day of her transfer. Mafuyu said nothing, leaving me to wonder if I should be a busybody and worry about her. However, all I got were her contemptuous looks, or her complaints about me.

"—If I tell you, will you help me?"

I lifted my head in fright, and stared at Mafuyu. Those teary eyes of hers looked like the water from rivers that flowed into the sea—their colors were dull and gloomy.

"If I tell you everything that is troubling me, will you do something for me? If I want you to swim to America, will you swim there for me? If I want you to chop off your right hand and give it to me, will you chop it off for me? If I want you to die, will you die for me?"

I was speechless. All I felt was a cold chill around me. The feeling was like trying to peek into an abyss during a dark night, when the moon wasn't around, and seeing something that should not be seen from the surface of the waters.

"If you can't do that, then do not speak as you please."

"Urm..... do you really want me to do those things for you?"

Mafuyu shook her head. Seemed like she had secretly cried a little.

"No."

"If..... you don't try saying it out loud, then how would anyone know? It's just telling someone about it. There's nothing to lose."

"Then make me go back in time, back to when I first started playing the piano."

"I'm not God, so how could I possibly do that!"

Which means—there must be something troubling her. Why does she hate the piano so much?

And also.....

"How about this then—please stop following me. You are an eyesore."

I'm not following you! This was the only thing I had to make her understand.

"I've said it many times already: I had been using this place since the beginning. The person who barged into this place was you, right? So I'm not following you."

I glanced at the far corner of the room. Her plain Stratocaster was placed on the stand over there.

I stood up, opened the locker, and took out a towel that had been used for quite a long time already.

"Look here, there are gaps by the sides of the door, right? You have to stuff them up with this towel. It isn't perfect, but you can more or less achieve better soundproofing this way. And also this....."

I took a broom and dustpan from the locker and showed them to her.

"Clean up this place properly. Can't you see how dirty it is along the walls and on the floor? It took me quite a bit of effort to clean this place up to this degree. Remember this: I'm here to get my classroom back. There's no way I'll allow a young guitarist like you, who hasn't even heard of rock before, to continue with that arrogant attitude of yours any longer!"

I spoke all those haughty words in the spur of the moment, and, almost immediately, regretted them a little. Mafuyu stared at me in a

dumbfounded state, with her eyes still filled with tears. Not long after, she took a deep breath, and said,

"..... So that's the reason you brought your bass to school?"

She was actually crying like a kid not too long ago, so what's with that annoying expression of hers? Can't I bring my bass here?

"Do you think you can win just by changing to a bass? Idiot!"

"Say what you want. I can't play that well in my current state, but I'll definitely catch up to you soon enough. Well then, let's settle it once and for all with this room as the prize!"

As I said that, I grabbed the broom and pointed its handle towards Mafuyu. I said it! Mafuyu seemed like she could no longer speak a word—she was just standing there stiffly, with her eyes opened wide. I interpreted that as her flinching at my words instead of her being dumbfounded by my actions.



After placing the broom and the dustpan back into the locker, I took out a spray can and placed it on the desk. Upon seeing the spray can, Mafuyu tilted her head cluelessly.

"..... Insecticide?"

"Yeah. You might find some centipedes in the room occasionally, but it's quite rare to see cockroaches these days."

Not long after I had left the classroom, I heard the sound of the door opening in a fluster behind me. I turned my head around and saw Mafuyu dashing out of the room with a pale white face.

"..... What now! I already left as you had requested, so just stay in there properly. You'll be considered late if you head back to the classroom right now anyway—"

"W-W-Why didn't you tell me about this from the beginning?"

That face of hers, which was on the brink of tears, really made her look like a kid.

"Why? Because you didn't ask!" My answer was the same as before. "You've been in there all this time, right? It should be fine."

"Idiot!"

My upper arm was repeatedly slapped by her many times. What a troublesome lass.



In the end, we returned to the classroom after first period ended. As Mafuyu was grabbing onto my arms with an expression close to tears, I could only admit defeat. I spent roughly an hour in the practice room killing all the insects I could find, and sealing up all the possible gaps the insects could crawl through with sealing tape.

I didn't think there was much of a point though. Things like centipedes and stuff can easily squeeze through an opening that's only two millimeters wide, right?

"Ah, the Princess is back."

"So you two really came back together huh....."

I felt slightly intimidated when everyone looked at us as we stepped into the classroom. Wait..... princess?

Class-rep Terada walked over, leaned herself against the desk, and said,

"After a round of discussion, the class has decided that we will be calling you 'Princess' from today onward."

Mafuyu's face initially turned ghostly white, but soon became red. I had always felt that, despite her not willing to speak much, one could easily know what she was thinking based on the changes in her expression.

"..... W-Why?"

"You don't like it regardless of whether we address you by your name or your surname, right? It's very inconvenient for us to talk to you like that."

"S-So that's the reason....."

A girl next to the Class-rep said deliberately, "If you kneel down and apologize, we won't call you by such an embarrassing name."

"..... No way."

"Oh, I see. Well then, please take care of us from now on, Princess."

"It's your turn to do the duties tomorrow, Princess. Therefore, you must get here earlier, instead of the usual, where you're always nearly late."

Ah, she's about to cry yet again. What's with all that—are they bullying a newcomer? But Mafuyu had only herself to blame for her predicament, so I didn't find her pitiful at all. Then again, what's with the huge difference in the attitudes among the young Japanese these days?

"Ah, if there's anything the Princess needs, you can just ask Nao." That cold sentence from Class-rep Terada instantly sealed my fate without my prior approval. I nearly fell off my chair when I heard that.

"Why me?"

"Nao, it's like this."

The guy sitting diagonally in front of me explained.

"We always call a prince or princess 'Your Highness,' right? Do you know why?"

"I don't..... and what's the link between these two things?"

"It means, 'we are the people who are below them and serving them'—like that. As it is rude to speak directly to the royals, we can only speak to their servants instead."

"Ohhh—" "I learned yet another thing today." These moronic guys around me became excited.

"Which means, the servant we're talking about is you!"

"Me? Why?" Despite my protesting by slamming my fists on the table repeatedly, no one was paying any attention to me; the decision was passed by the class in overwhelming numbers, and therefore, too powerful for me to reject. I looked in the direction of my only possible savior—Chiaki. However, all she did was look at Mafuyu and me suspiciously. She then made a weird face before turning around to face the lecture stand.

1. 江成 和己, Japanese actor/host/comedian.
2. Manzai, traditional style of stand-up comedy in Japanese culture (for those who do not read Onii-ai here). Just like Ebichiri, Ebimayo's a parody of her name, which means mayonnaise prawns.

Chapter 8 - Princess, Revolutionist

I grabbed my bass and escaped from the classroom immediately after school, heading straight towards the roof. Once I got there, I saw a girl in her uniform sitting on the wired fence, looking towards the sky. Her hair was caressed by the winds, and she seemed to be in a pretty good mood. It was Kagurazaka-senpai.

"Isn't that a little too slow, young man? The after-school bell already ended."

"No, it's Senpai who's too early....."

Lessons were still ongoing, so how could she get here before the bell finished ringing?

"The melody of the time signal at the factory opposite of us overlaps with the chimes of our school at this time, resulting in a coincidental and intriguing polyphony. I really hoped you could listen to it, young man."

"Haa." Speaking of which, it's a little too dangerous for you to be sitting at such a high place, right?

Senpai jumped down from the fence and landed right in front of me.

"Have you decided to join our club?"

"Well....." I removed the bass that was slung across my shoulders and leaned it against the fence. I was slightly hesitant with my words. "I'll need your help to learn the bass, but as for joining the band....."

"Why?" Senpai arched her beautifully-shaped brows.

"Because I just want to win back that classroom so I can listen to my CDs. I'm not playing the bass for Senpai's sake."

"But you came here quickly according to my instructions."

"That's simply because I'll need Senpai's help if I want to teach

Mafuyu a proper lesson."

"So by needing my help, you're referring to me teaching you how to play the bass. You're using me just like I'm using you, right?"

The way she put it was rather blunt, but I still nodded my head honestly. If it meant winning against Mafuyu, I couldn't care less about my image.

A smile appeared on Senpai's face.

"Mmm, I see. You no longer have the expression of a loser."

Her smile wasn't as theatrical as usual—instead, it was an extremely natural smile. I was shocked.

"Isn't this fine? I've already predicted that you'll be joining us anyway. So let's begin!"

Senpai squatted down and took out a bunch of stuff from the backpack on the floor: a mini-amplifier with batteries in it, the cables for the amplifier, and replacement strings for the bass.

"..... But, why do we need to practice on the roof?"

"Young man, what do you think is the first step in training for the basics of bass?"

She directed the question at me as she took the strings out of a bag and unwound them.

"Hmm— isn't it practicing the finger crab walk?"

It's a sort of repetitive practice of the basics. The player sets a fixed tempo and begins pressing on the frets in order—moving from the index finger to the little finger—then plays out each scale in order. Because the left hand moves horizontally inwards little by little, some people call it the finger crab walk. Sounds noobish, but it covers the basics of guitar playing. However, Senpai shook her head.

"There's another thing that needs to be done before that. It's the reason why I called you up to the roof."

Senpai pulled the string tightly by its ends.

"I've set up a tightrope from here to the roof of the opposite dormitory using a string. You shall walk on it to the other side of the

building."

I was stunned. I nearly dropped the bass as I was taking it out from its case.

"..... Eh?"

"You can't be a bassist if you can't entrust your life to the strings. I'll be here praying for your safety. You'd probably die if you fell off, so you better prepare yourself mentally first."

"No, no no no, what the heck are you talking about?"

"My my," Senpai shrugged.

"To become a bassist, it is necessary for you to undergo special training that puts your life at risk. You mean you don't know? Even the most famous bassists of Japan had undergone all sorts of training with their lives on the line. For example, they'd knock their head repeatedly with a tin can, or expose themselves to the blazing fire of a gas explosion..... and so on."

"So the famous bassists of Japan whom you're referring to..... are?"

"The deceased Ikariya Chosuke."^[1]

"The Drifters is a comedy group, isn't it!?" I slammed the bass case against the ground.^[2]

"The Drifters is a band as well! They were the opening act for The Beatles' concert. That's really rude of you, young man."

"I know that, so stop trying to change the subject!"

"The thing about the tightrope was obviously a joke. The first thing you should do is change the strings of the bass. Since the instrument has been in the store for quite a while, the elasticity of the strings has gradually slackened."

T-This person is just.....

I didn't think there was any point in saying anything, so I just changed the four strings in silence.

"The real reason for me calling you up to the roof, is that!"

Kagurazaka-senpai pressed against the fence and pointed downwards. Without even looking at where she was pointing, I

understood what Senpai was referring to—as the sounds of the guitar entered my ears. The classroom that Mafuyu practiced her guitar in was right beneath us.

Then again, I had taught her how to soundproof the room with the towel, so why could I still hear the sounds of her guitar? The carefree melody was Ravels' <Pavane for a Dead Princess>. Was it due to the shock of our classmates addressing her as 'Princess'?

"It was seven days ago."

Kagurazaka-senpai leaned her back against the fence and gazed into the sky.

"I was skipping classes starting from the very first period, and stayed here till school was over, listening to the sounds of the streets."

What's this person in school for?

"Then, the sun gradually began to set, and just when it felt like it was about to rain, the sound of that guitar came. It was Book II of Bach's <The Well-Tempered Clavier>. However, she skipped the fugues and played only the preludes. I was so pissed I didn't notice it was already raining—I sat down and continued listening."

"You'll catch a cold like that....."

"All she played were the preludes, right up to **No. 24 in B minor**—it was sweet torture. Then, I heard the door opening, so I snuck a peek at the room and saw a beautiful girl walking out. Her hair was a clear maroon color—it was just like frozen maple syrup. That was enough for me to fall for her."

The bass slipped off my knees and fell to the ground.

"Urm..... Senpai?"

"Hmm?"

"But Mafuyu's a girl?"

"So what? I like beautiful things. In my eyes, gender doesn't matter. Why do you think I allowed Aihara Chiaki to join the band as our comrade? Because she's cute."

"Please don't say such shocking things nonchalantly."

"In any case, I never expected her to be able to play the drums that well in less than a year."

"Chiaki would cry if she heard that from you."

"No problem. I'll tell Comrade Chiaki about my tastes unreservedly."

"So everyone really does think you're someone who'll get her hands on whatever she wants?"

I was shocked speechless. I never thought she'd be a person like that. I should just learn bass by myself—it's still not too late for me to turn back. I began to tune my bass while thinking of that.

"However, Ebisawa Mafuyu didn't listen to a single word I said. Also, based on my detailed observations, for some unknown reason, you're the only person in this school whom she'll converse with."

I jumped in shock and lifted my head.

What appeared before me was that destructively cute smile of Senpai's, which she had only used once that week.

"Therefore, young man, I need your strength."

I had no idea why, but I couldn't look straight into Senpai's eyes—all I could do was shift my gaze back to the bass in my hands. That was the first time someone had said that to me in my entire life. No, wait a second, calm down and think about it properly. Senpai said herself that I'm just a pawn to be used by her.

"So your actual plan is to gather a bunch of cute girls, right? It's not really about the band."

I voiced the doubt within me, but all Kagurazaka-senpai did was tilt her head and look at me with her eyes blinking repeatedly.

All these conversations I had with her weren't just hallucinations of mine, right? That thought suddenly flashed past my mind.

"Young man, do you know why humans are born into this world?"

What's with the sudden question? How could I possibly know!

"The answer's simple. Humans are born into this world for love and revolution."

Suddenly, the wind breezed past us, lifting Senpai's long hair. I

nearly fell over, despite only feeling a faint gust of wind on my shoulders. Why's she saying all this? Do I harbor some misunderstanding about what life is all about? These questions appeared in my mind for a very brief moment.

"Lev Trotsky..... you probably don't know about him, do you?"^[3]

I no longer had the strength to shake my head.

"He was the second-to-last revolutionist! He fled to Mexico after losing to his comrade, Joseph Stalin, in a political battle. He died before witnessing the start of the revolution of the world. However, his misfortune was not because Stalin was not by his side....."

Senpai took my bass away from my hands blankly and plugged it into the amplifier.

"His misfortune was that Paul McCartney was not by his side. The last revolutionist, John Lennon—he was lucky to have had Paul McCartney next to him."

Senpai suppressed her overwhelming emotions and began to pick the strings with her nails. A series of intense and out-of-tune sounds blared from the amplifiers, stimulating my ears. I couldn't understand at all—how could the thick strings of the bass produce such a high-pitched sound? She was playing the prelude of The Beatles' [**<Revolution>**](#). It's the song of revolution written by John Lennon, and it's a song that's widely misunderstood.

"Love, revolution and music are inseparable in my life. The strength to push for the never-ending revolution; the strength to find the Paul who belongs only to me; and the strength to convert these thoughts into songs that I sing—there is no difference between the three. Young man, are you satisfied with the answer I gave you?"

Is your answer even directed towards my question.....?

"Ah, I'm totally clueless about what you're trying to say."

Just as I was about to voice some of my thoughts, Senpai knitted her brows and shook her head, mumbling, "My, my."

"Can't help it then. To put it in simpler terms you can understand, it's like this: aside from gathering a bunch of cute girls, I'm serious about forming a band as well."

"Then just say that right at the start!" I banged the case yet again.

"It's better to be a little more poetic."

"You always treat others as idiots as well, don't you Senpai? And stop with that proud look of yours—I'm not praising you."

"Young man, your reactions are quite interesting. Come here."

Senpai was smiling bashfully. Come here? Be slightly more polite, will you!

"Well then, let's modify the bass. I'm quite troubled by your knack for going off-topic." Me? It's my fault? Just as I was about to speak, Senpai suddenly returned the bass to me.

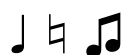
"We'll have to create the sound before you practice. See, I've brought all sorts of pickups here. You have your tools handy, right?"

Senpai took out a few guitar parts from her backpack. A pickup is something that captures the vibration of the strings. By changing these parts, the tone of the instrument can change significantly. Other modifications include changing the internal wiring and etc., with the most extreme being punching holes in the guitar itself.

"..... You mean, we're going to modify the bass right now?"

"That Aria Pro II of yours is a cheap bass, but I specially chose it in consideration of the timbre of Ebisawa Mafuyu's Stratocaster. However, that's not enough. This bass is unable to create the tones that offer a perfect response to her guitar."

Senpai pointed beneath the fence. A series of glamorous rapid strummings of the guitar, played by Mafuyu, came from that direction. I see, so that's the reason for summoning me to the roof?



Senpai and I repeatedly pondered on how to modify the bass. It was really interesting, and it just so happened that I was good at it as well.

"..... The sounds of your bass are already comparable to those of the bass of Greg Lake."

After two long hours, Kagurazaka-senpai took the completed bass—amid the heaps of wood shavings, metal bits, and pieces of

snipped strings—and said that with praise. I was slightly embarrassed by that.

"Why don't you work on my Les Paul as well? I want to make its tone slightly richer."

"No way, I don't have the guts to work on that high-end guitar."

Senpai cracked a laugh and began clearing the tools and rubbish.

"Try to connect your bass to the amplifiers as often as possible when you're practicing, so you can feel the sounds with your body and recall them when you're playing in an actual performance."

I nodded my head and, once again, plugged my bass into the mini-amplifier. The clarity of the bass was totally different from how it was when I first bought it. This was to match the clean timbre of Mafuyu's guitar, which she played with a mechanical precision. If you ask me, I'm quite confident in my modifications as well.

Since the moment Senpai unreasonably forced me to buy this bass, I had never quite felt the instrument was mine. However, now, it really felt like the bass was covered in my sweat from the last ten years of use—I could use it comfortably. It was my partner that I had created from scratch. I could finally begin practicing.

"Of course, I won't be making you practice basic things repeatedly. It's something necessary, but you can practice that on your own at home. It may be quite sudden, but I'd like you to play a song for me right now."

Senpai placed a hand-written score right before me.

"Do you know this song?"

I nodded in reply. There was no title on the score, but after a glance, I knew straight away.

"I won't deny that the melodies of a bass aren't that attention-grabbing. There are almost no songs that people can recognize purely by bass alone; however, there is one exception, which is this. Therefore, I think all bassists should start with this song, and end with this song as well."

The song is Ben E. King's [**<Stand by Me>**](#). Bum, bum, badabum, bum..... that's the bass rhythm—it's true, two verses are all it takes

to revive the tune in your memory.

"Then pace yourself to the metronome and play the song! Keep playing till night has come and the stars are up, alright?"

After she was done singing the lyrics, Senpai gave a wave before opening the door and leaving. I heaved a sigh, sat down on the floor and picked up the guitar.

Though Senpai was always surprising me, I had never once thought she'd make me play a song this soon.

Hey! Ain't you gonna Stand by Me?



About an hour into my practice, something suddenly felt out of place. Initially, I couldn't pinpoint what that feeling was.

It wasn't until I lifted my fingers off the strings and stopped the metronome, that I finally realized—

I could no longer hear the sound of Mafuyu's guitar. I lifted my head and shot a glance at the clock on the wall of the walkway—it was almost six. Mafuyu would usually play till it was about time for school to end, so she shouldn't be home yet. Perhaps she went to the toilet or something?

I increased the tempo of the metronome slightly and started playing from the beginning again. This time, I hummed the lyrics as I played.

However, the rhythm of the lyrics is different from the rhythm of the bass, which made it difficult for me to play. My fingers stopped playing yet again, due to that out-of-place feeling I had felt earlier.

The door of the roof should be closed, and yet, it was slightly ajar. I leaned my bass against the fence and walked to the door. Upon opening the door, I saw a frightened Mafuyu standing on the other side. She took a step back, but missed the steps and nearly fell backwards down the stairs. As her hands were waving wildly in the air, I quickly grabbed her by her shoulders and pulled her back up.

"..... What are you doing here?"

After much difficulty in steadying herself, Mafuyu brushed my arms

off her shoulders. She turned her head away quickly and answered,
"It felt really noisy up here."

I glanced at the bass behind her in slight shock. She heard that? But I didn't make much sound to begin with.

"Why are you practicing in a place like this?" Mafuyu glared at me. She seemed to be rather unhappy.

"Didn't I teach you the method to soundproof the room using the towel?"

"If I did that, I wouldn't be able to escape fast enough if something appeared in the room."

If something appeared in the room?

"It's..... when something..... appeared in the room..... or things like that."

Mafuyu lowered her head while speaking vaguely.

"Ah, things like centipedes or cockroaches?"

"Wa! Wa!" Mafuyu cupped both her ears and stomped on my foot a few times. It hurts! What the heck are you doing!

She turned the situation into something rather stupid, so all I could do was head back to my bass. For some unknown reason, Mafuyu was following me.

"Urm..... What?"

"It's out of tune."

Mafuyu puffed her cheeks and pointed at my bass rather unhappily.

"Eh?"

"The third string is too flat. I was really uncomfortable when I heard it just now. You mean you didn't notice?" I checked my tuner, and it was indeed slightly out of tune. She could hear it from three floors beneath me? She's that good?

"Let me borrow it."

Just as I was trying to tune it, Mafuyu suddenly snatched my bass away. She quickly gave the tuning pegs a few twists to tune the instrument, then passed the bass back to me.

"Thanks for helping me tune it! I'll pay you ten yen each time you do that, so please help me out in the future."

"Idiot."

I suddenly remembered something, and began playing <Stand By Me>.

"What is this song? I've heard it somewhere before," Mafuyu asked. Impressive, it was exactly as Senpai said. As a girl who had been carefully nurtured under the influence of classical music, this was probably the only song Mafuyu could recognize just by the bass alone.

"It's a song called <Stand By Me>."

"..... What is the song about?"

"What's it about huh? Hmm..... It's a story about how a person was walking along the railway, when suddenly, he found a corpse next to it."

Mafuyu knitted her brows.

"..... Are you talking nonsense again?"

"No, I'm not lying." Though that's a summary of the movie with the same name, and not the lyrics of the song.^[4]

Not long after, Mafuyu sat next to the door of the roof and listened to my raw bass techniques. Then again, how long are you planning to stay around here? It's really tough for me to play when you're around, so please go back already? Perhaps it was because Mafuyu was staring at me, but I played the notes wrong quite a few times.

"Are you happy?"

Mafuyu suddenly mumbled those words. I stopped moving my hands and lifted my head.

"..... Are you happy playing the bass?"

I had no idea how to answer her sudden question.

"Hmm, it's not too bad. It's rather nice to be able to gradually play the songs that I like."

"Really?"

Mafuyu didn't seem the least interested. All she did was stare at

the floor.

I asked her the same question, "You're not happy when you play the guitar?"

"Not the least bit."

"If you're not happy, why don't you stop playing then?"

"Why don't you just die?"

I gripped hard onto the neck of my bass and took a deep breath. Alright, it's fine, don't get angry. There'll be no end to this if I take every word of hers seriously. I have to be more mature than that.

"If you're not happy, then why do you still coop yourself up in the practice room every day to play the guitar? Just go home and play your piano already!"

"It's none of your business."

It has plenty to do with me! You've snatched my place of rest away from me, no?

"Then..... can you not lock the door with a padlock? You go straight home right after school on Fridays, right? Can you let me use the classroom on that day?"

"How did you know I go straight home on Fridays? Pervert!"

That has nothing to do with me being a pervert or not. I can easily see that with my own eyes.

"No! Don't ever come close to me!"

Our conversation ended like that.

I continued practicing quietly, but Mafuyu had no intention of leaving. She was walking to-and-from the door, hesitating on whether she should head back downstairs. What's she doing?

"— Princess?"

Mafuyu jumped in shock and turned around.

"Are you calling me that as well?"

"Then how do you want me to address you? Ebisawa?"

She shot a glance at me angrily.

"Mafuyu?"

This time, she shifted her gaze diagonally downwards and nodded her head while biting her lips slightly. So she more or less accepts it if I call her by her own name? But it's quite difficult for me to address her that way!

"Just tell me honestly if there's something you want to say. I told you that yesterday, right?"

"Why are you acting all high and mighty?"

Do you have any right to be saying that to me? However, just as I was about to stare back at her, Mafuyu looked somewhere else. It was as though she was saying something awkward—she murmured softly,

"..... There's something moving behind the cabinet with a buzzing sound."

Hmm? Ah..... so that's the reason she came here?

"Don't you have the insecticide?"

"I sprayed it in the room before running out of there in a hurry."

Man, that's not the way you use insecticide! These aren't those boron insecticides where you smoke them to death.

"It won't work if you don't spray it at the insect directly!"

"You're asking me to do something like that?"

Mafuyu said that as she clenched her teeth with tears in the corners of her eyes; her body was trembling slightly. Is that the way to ask a favor from someone? Then again, if I leave her alone, Mafuyu will never use that room again, which means victory will be mine?

"If you don't like it either way, how about returning the room to me like a mature lady?"

"You scumbag!" Mafuyu said to me while holding back her tears, "Whatever, I get it. I will do it myself."

Mafuyu slammed the door, and from the sounds of her footsteps, it sounded like she was walking downwards. Go ahead and try your best!

I continued to play <Stand by Me>.

Still, I was quite curious about how it ended, so I looked down through the fence.

Mafuyu was standing rigidly outside the practice room, with her left hand clenched into a fist. After staring at the handle of the door for quite a while, she reached out for it, but stopped almost immediately, as though all the strength in her body was drained out of her. She stood there motionlessly, and her back was trembling nonstop. She looked really pitiful, so I switched off the power of the amplifier, placed my bass down, and got up.

So that buzzing sound wasn't actually caused by an insect. After reaching the courtyard downstairs, I walked into the practice room. When I tried shaking the cabinet, something that was stuck behind it suddenly fell on the floor with a *pa*. It was actually the front cover of Iron Maiden's first album. The buzzing sounds were probably made by the rustling of the pages on the front cover, caused by the vibration of the cabinet due to the sounds of her guitar.^[5]

I originally thought I had lost the front cover of the album forever, and was thus really happy when I managed to get it back. I delightedly showed Mafuyu the cover, which features the **grotesque image of a zombie**—needless to say, she sprayed the insecticide at my face while crying and yelling at the same time.

Notes

1. Wiki page [here](#)
2. It's the Japanese band/comedy group, and not the English one.
3. Or better known as [Leon Trotsky](#)
4. Talking about the film '[Stand by Me](#)'.
5. [Iron Maiden's](#) an English heavy metal band

Chapter 9 - Whale, Paganini, Fighters

"If Ebisawa dislikes the guitar, why does she still play it?"

Chiaki had plugged her portable music player into a set of mini-speakers, and was listening to the sarabande of <English Suites>. She asked that question as she tapped her fingers on her knees, rapping to the rhythm of the tune.

"She's really good at the piano. And even when she does play the guitar, all she plays are piano pieces, right?"

"Well, they may not be all she knows on the guitar."

Kagurazaka-senpai had laid out a huge number of scores on the concrete floor, and was carefully perusing all of them as she answered Chiaki.

Since the Folk Music Research Club wasn't an officially recognized club, activities were conducted mainly on the roof. Even though I wasn't a member of the club, Senpai still asked me to head to the roof daily after school—I'm not sure if her plan is to slowly rope me into the club. Because we were holding a team meeting, Chiaki was also present.

"So, what are your thoughts after listening to Mafuyu's CDs?"

Yesterday, which was the fifth day since I started practicing according to Senpai's instructions, Senpai said to me,

"Gather all the pieces Mafuyu has played, as well as their scores, and bring them to school tomorrow. Since you live with a music critic, you should have the entire collection properly kept in your house, right?"

I definitely have the scores and CDs in my house, but locating them was another matter altogether. I spent almost the entire night searching for the scores in Tetsurou's messy library and, as a result, was almost late for school this morning. Senpai seemed rather happy as she looked, one by one, through the scores I brought. I

knew Senpai was scanning the scores as she listened to Mafuyu's music on the piano.

"So the pieces Ebisawa Mafuyu plays are centered on Bach; but there's no way for her to play the fugue with the guitar—it's technically impossible, right?"

"Probably?" I shrugged.

Fugue is derived from the term "flee" in Italian. This style of composition began during the early days of modern music—in the Baroque era—and was pushed to perfection by Bach. It's a style that utilizes various voices entering at different times, voices that chase the initial melody—therefore, some call it the "fleeing tune" as well.^[1]

This means that, because the guitar can basically only play a single melody, it's extremely difficult for Mafuyu to reproduce the fugue.

"Therefore, if you are to challenge her, you'll have to do it through the fugue huh....."

"I see..... Eh? What did you say?"

My hand stopped strumming the bass.

"The so-called team meeting was for this?"

"What did you think it was for?" Senpai said in shock. "Young man, I think it's about time you are aware of this, but the difference in skill between you and Ebisawa Mafuyu is akin to the difference between a white ant and a blue whale. It's impossible for you to win if we do not come up with a strategy."

"I already know that, but please be more gentle with your analogies, would you?"

"Then how about an apple against the Earth?" Chiaki joined in.

That's even worse!

"However, you can't challenge her with Bach. There will be no chance of victory if you do that," Senpai resumed the topic.

"Eh, wait a second, I'm gonna play classical music?"

Senpai lifted her sight from the scores and looked even more shocked now.

"But of course? How else do you plan to 'teach her a proper lesson'?"

"..... Urm, well....." To be honest, I had never thought of that before.

"I have nothing concrete in mind, but I guess something along the lines of me playing some rock for her to listen to, so she can be slightly impressed with me?"

"Do you think someone who possesses such sublime guitar technique would be shaken by what you have to offer under these circumstances? Remember—it'd be really troublesome for me if you've forgotten this—I want to welcome Ebisawa Mafuyu into the Folk Music Research Club as my comrade. Which means, I want to welcome her as a member of the band."

"Eh?"

And so?

"So we must be able to play the pieces together with Ebisawa, right?" As she flipped through the scores on the floor, Chiaki continued, "Meaning, they must be pieces Ebisawa knows."

Kagurazaka-senpai patted Chiaki's head lovingly. I see, so that's the reason we'll be using the fugue huh. The pieces Mafuyu loves, but can't play by herself.

My bass was carefully modified to match the timbre of Mafuyu's guitar, which means..... Is that what she's implying? But wait..... eh? That means me joining the club is part of Senpai's plans as well? So that's already a given in Senpai's mind? I did tell her clearly that all I wanted was that room, and that I wouldn't be joining the club.

"However, she may not fall for our ploy, even if we were to carefully select one of Bach's fugues..... Moreover, even if we successfully instigate the battle, the last-minute skills of this young man would probably be incomparable to hers, and things might just end with that." Senpai bit her lower lip and tossed the scores away. "Well, we may still have a chance if the young man stays by my side and undergoes a year of my training, but that'll take too much time."

I don't want that sort of training either! It feels like my life would never be the same again if I underwent that sort of training.

"..... Hey, Nao. Didn't Ebisawa say she would disappear by June?"

After hearing that from Chiaki, I looked into the sky and began recounting her words. Actually, Mafuyu did say that in front of the whole class on the day she transferred to our school. As she did lots of unpleasant things after that, I had completely forgotten about it.

Those words—what exactly did they mean?

Senpai asked again, "Disappearing in June? She said nothing else aside from that?" Chiaki pressed her finger against her lower lip and thought for a moment, before shaking her head.

"I'll be gone in June, so please forget about me." That's all she said. What did she mean? Is she transferring to another school? Could she be going to study in the high school affiliated with the College of Music?"

"That's bad then." Senpai crossed her arms and said, "If we can get her into the club, I can still tie her down by mesmerizing her with my charms. However, it'll be troublesome if she disappears before that."

"Senpai, there's the Immorality Act, so you know you can't do anything that's overly crazy, right?"

"No worries. If it's me, I can charm her without stripping, so I won't be infringing the Immorality Act."

What's with that eager look of yours?

"So..... young man, if you do not have the resolve to die for my romance and revolution..... Oh!"

Senpai suddenly switched off her discman.

"..... What's wrong?"

"Ebisawa Mafuyu's here."

I looked downwards through the fence and managed to see her back, with that long maroon hair, vanishing into the classroom of the old music building. I'm sure Senpai didn't see that, so how did she know Mafuyu was here? Is she a wild beast?

We laid our bodies low, and quietly waited for a while. Soon, we could hear the sounds of the guitar. Eh? What's this tune? I've heard it somewhere before, but I can't remember. There's a hint of Liszt in

its style.

"—It's Paganini."

Senpai said into my ears. I remembered.

Niccolò Paganini, a violinist who was known as the Devil, due to his overly impressive techniques. He was a very talented composer too, but due to his distrusting nature, he hated releasing the scores of his compositions. Because of that, nearly all of his works are lost.

His violin concerto and capriccio—along with the piano etudes composed by Franz Liszt based on his capriccio—are probably the only works of his left in modern times.

What Mafuyu was playing was the etude composed by Liszt.

It felt like the bones in my body would creak from those intense vibratos if I listened any longer. Chiaki was cringing as well. What an irritable performance.

"..... I see..... Paganini huh."

Senpai was muttering to herself again. I turned around to take a look, and saw her digging through Mafuyu's CDs with a serious expression; her left hand was also sifting through the scores. What's going on?

Finally, Senpai found a CD and a score.

"Found it."

"What's with those things?"

"Young man, can you lend me these?"

"Well, I'm fine with it....."

"Then I'll be heading home first. I have a song to compose."

"That song?"

"That's right, young man—Paganini. We'll do exactly what Paganini did. We can win with this."

Senpai's face was overflowing with some sort of energy, but I was completely confused. What does she mean? What Senpai is holding in her hands is not Paganini at all—

"Of course. The only person who can teach Beethoven a lesson is

Beethoven. Right?"

Senpai flashed a cute wink before walking towards the school building with the score and the CD. She's still the same as ever, saying things no one can understand. The same thing Paganini did?

There's no way I could understand it, no matter how hard I tried; so I placed my bass back onto my thigh.

"Senpai looks really happy—"

Chiaki was sending Senpai off with her gaze and murmuring to herself. Well, that person looks happy all the time anyway.

"I never knew Senpai liked Nao that much."

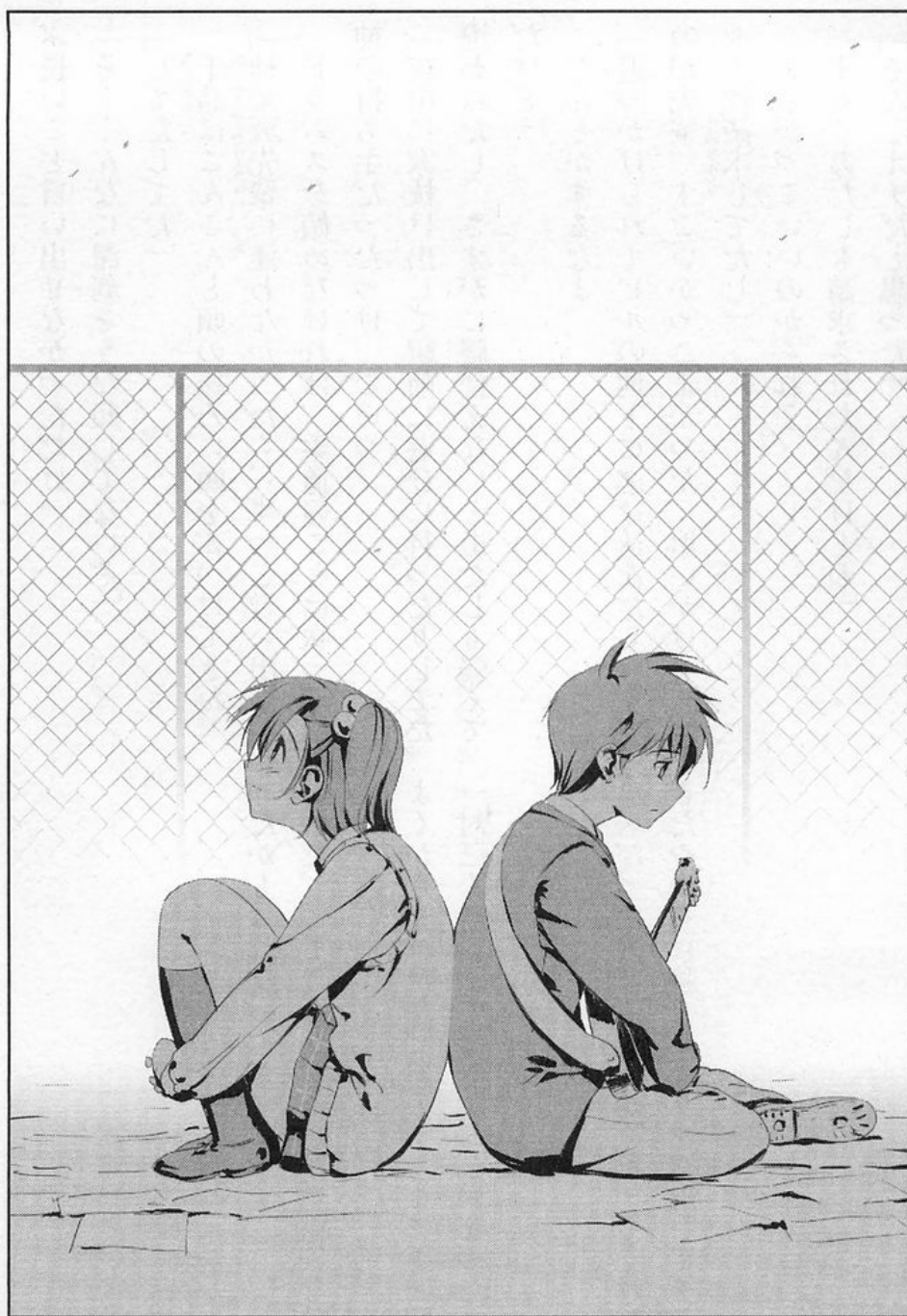
"The one she likes is Mafuyu, not me. I'm just the bridge that connects them."

Chiaki narrowed her eyes and stared at me, as though she was dissatisfied with something.

"..... What?"

"Mmm— nothing."

Chiaki suddenly stood up and sat down right behind me, pressing her back against mine. I moved slightly forward in shock, but since she leaned on me again, I could move no further.



"She said we're fighters."
Chiaki suddenly spoke.

"..... Fighters?"

"Yes. Haven't you heard? The Folk Music Research Club is just a front to fool the world. We're actually a revolutionary army."

"Nope, not at all." A front to fool the world? Senpai actually managed to say that? Oh please!

"..... What was it again? She said something like, the Sixth International or the Vanguard Party or something."

Is that some sort of misleading students' movement of a certain unknown era? Also, what's with the sixth? Where's the fifth?^[2]

"I really don't know which of her words are true, and which of those are meant as a joke."

"Perhaps all of her words are true?" Chiaki laughed, "But what if all of them were just a joke? Or rather, there's no way you can discern the truth from the jokes in her words, right?"

"Oh—I guess you could put it that way."

"Didn't I injure myself during the competition last summer? Back then, the doctor said I couldn't practice Judo ever again."

"Wasn't that something that only happened a month ago?"

"Mmm—I lied to you. Nao somehow seemed very worried, so I couldn't bring myself to say it back then."

So even the words of the doctor were a lie? Seeing her act all fine soon after her injury, I was totally relieved; but thinking back, I was really an idiot back then.

"I was really depressed, alright? Your expressions said everything—you thought my injuries were really serious. I couldn't bring myself to tell you that it was actually something that had happened really long ago."

"I..... never thought it was something serious."

"Yes, you did."

Chiaki knocked the back of her head against mine.

"If I hadn't met Kagurazaka-senpai, I may have kept it from you forever." She managed to give up judo because she has the drums now—is that what she's trying to say? But is Chiaki actually that

delicate?

"Back then, I frequently ran out of the house in the middle of the night, and roamed around the station by myself. Lots of people came to me looking for trouble. Since I was mistaken for a boy—and adding on the fact I couldn't harness my strength due to my back injury—I often found myself in a lot of trouble. However, I could still take them on if it wasn't more than one on three."

There's no need for you to take on those sorts of things!

"I was chased by them, so I ran into the basement of a building. Then, I realized it was a live house; and it was there that Senpai held them off for me. She was really cool—she actually brought some drinks over, and asked them for the entrance fees."

..... That's cool?

"Ah, but she asked for my entrance fee too."

"Just as I thought."

"As I didn't have much cash on me, I could only pay using my body."

I wanted to tsukkomi her on that, but I gave up in the end. "So, what's this 'fighters' thing about?" That term sounded like it was used to describe the grunts in the movies.

"Right. Senpai said that, to start a revolution, she'd need at least three more people. The chairman, the treasurer, and an army commander or something. With Nao joining us, all that's left is Ebisawa."

"Hold on, I haven't joined the club yet, yeah?"

Suddenly, I no longer felt Chiaki's back. I fell backwards onto the concrete floor and gently knocked my head against it—the pain spread to my jaws.

"Ugh....."

As I opened my eyes, I saw Chiaki's upside-down face closing in on me. I gulped in shock.

"There's no reason not to join us, right? You've bought your bass too."

"That's because—"

Chiaki grabbed my head with both of her hands. I could no longer move even if I wanted to.

"..... Is it for Ebisawa?"

For Ebisawa—it was slightly different from what those words implied, but I nodded my head anyway.

"Why? Why are you doing this much for her? You shouldn't have much drive in you, no? Moreover, you've been practicing nonstop recently, and your technique's getting better. I was quite surprised by you, you know?"

I wouldn't know how to answer her if she asked me that one more time. "It's to get back my personal listening room"—that sounds like an excuse no matter how you look at it.

I mean, if all I want is to be able to listen to my CDs leisurely after school, there should be other, simpler methods of achieving that.

So, is it for the reputation of rock? Or my pride? No matter how I try to explain it, something doesn't feel quite right. But no matter what, I have to challenge her.

I thought quietly for a while. Chiaki then released me and stood up.

"How did you and Ebisawa meet each other?"

Chiaki sat against my back again, and asked.

"Why are we talking about this?"

It's hard to explain what happened that day, so I had no desire to talk about it.

"I just told you how I met Senpai, so it's your turn to tell me."

I couldn't think of any good reason to refuse—and Chiaki was knocking her head against mine—so I began to recount the incidents of that day. I told her about the department store that was filled with rubbish at the ends of the world, and how Mafuyu was playing the piano sonata by herself.

I left out only one thing: the junk that gave off the sounds of an orchestra.

She probably wouldn't have believed me anyway—and for some

reason, I felt it'd be better if I kept it a secret, even from someone like Chiaki.

"That place seems quite interesting. I want to visit it too."

"No, it's not fun at all."

The heaps of large-sized rubbish were like skeletons left over from some war, left to rot gradually as days passed by—among them, stood a piano. Everything was deadly quiet, and the world had ended for that place—Mafuyu was probably the only person who could breathe life back into that place.

I tried to recall, yet again, the melody of the piano sonata Mafuyu played on that day. It was formed by a sequence of arpeggios, just like the gentle bobbing of the surface of the sea. Is that Debussy..... no wait, it's probably Prokofiev? I still couldn't recall the name of that tune.

Also, it somehow felt like it was something I couldn't touch. Mafuyu did say, back then, that she wanted me to erase that song from my memories.

If so, that song must hold a certain key. For Mafuyu, that song leads to one of the secrets she's holding.

It wasn't till then that I realized I didn't understand Mafuyu at all.

"In any case....."

Chiaki's voice suddenly appeared before me and pulled me back to reality.

Unknown to me, Chiaki was already squatting before me and staring at me.

"You're very concerned about Ebisawa, right?"

"Hmm..... mmm?" I replied vaguely, "Nah..... what? I don't get what you're talking about."

"There's no need for you to play dumb at this point."

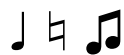
Chiaki showed a faint smile and gently knocked my forehead once. She then stood up.

"Alright, I'll be heading back home as well. I wanted to ask if you needed my help for your training, but I guess it doesn't matter."

Chiaki walked back into the building without even looking back. I was left alone on the broad empty roof, and the lonely melody of Mafuyu came from beneath my feet.

Why are all the girls around me such perplexing people? I shook my head and picked up my bass again.

I suddenly remembered how Mafuyu had come barging onto the roof once before, and thus, I began practicing only after I finished tuning the instrument.



The next day, after she came into the classroom, Mafuyu passed me a squarish light-grey object from her bag. It's pretty well wrapped—what is it?

"This....."

"Eh? What?"

She shoved the thing into my hands. I looked at it from all sides several times.

"That thing, it's..... my fault. I bought this for you."

I had no idea what was going on. Mafuyu bought something for me? What sort of joke is this?

"But, you absolutely cannot open it here."

I nodded despite my brain being in a mess. However, those classmates of mine who don't listen to a single word others have to say, came leaning in close to me—excited, as usual. One of the guys snatched the package from my hands.

"What? A present from Princess? Oi oi, is this for real?"

"It's not a CD. Nao, can we open it?"

"Eh, ah, wait....."

The packaging was torn open before Mafuyu and I could even stop them. It was a CD. On its cover was a zombie with a blood-stained axe in its hands, giving off a nasty grin. It was titled "IRON MAIDEN Killers."

"Didn't I say not to open it!? Do not show it to me, it is disgusting!"

Mafuyu turned away, and her voice sounded like it was close to tears.

"Mafuyu said I'm disgusting yet again. My sole hope for living is gone."

"Don't worry, she's not talking about you." "But this zombie looks slightly similar to you, don't you think?"

My classmates were saying stupid things again. I snatched the CD back from them.

"Urm..... you bought the CD for me just because of the cover?"

I had thrown away the cover I had found behind the cabinet, as it was beyond recovery all thanks to Mafuyu spraying a load of the insecticide on it. Mafuyu nodded with her back still facing me, and murmured, "Hurry up and put it away."

It was just a cover, so why was she so concerned about it? I thought of Mafuyu, who was disgusted by just the image of the zombie. Then, I thought of her going to the heavy metal section and flipping through the CDs—all filled with covers containing extreme designs and images—while desperately trying to locate Iron Maiden's album hidden within. I no longer knew what I should say to her.

Moreover—

"What?"

Mafuyu noticed I had something to say. She shot a glance at me.

"Urm, no..... it's nothing."

"Say it!"

"Mmm..... It may be a little too much for me to be saying this, since you bought it specially for me, but this is actually their second album. The cover that you ruined is actually from their first album." I couldn't blame her for confusing the two, since the styles of both covers are extremely similar. After hearing that, Mafuyu's face immediately turned red. Oh shit.

Bang—Mafuyu slammed her palms against her desk and stood up.

"I'll go buy it right now."

"Nah, lessons are about to begin."

"I'll buy it!"

"It just so happens that my second album's in pretty bad shape, so I'm really grateful to you for buying this album for me." Just as I was consoling Mafuyu, the preparatory bell rang. And because our teacher came to class earlier than usual, Mafuyu finally removed the idea from her head. I really don't get girls at all!

Notes

1. Oh joy, tl;dr time. K, the Japs actually do the term fugue as フーガ (Fuuga). [Wiki](#) said that the English term "is derived from either the French word fugue or the **Italian fuga**", so that's where the derivation comes in. 遁走曲 (literally means fleeing tune) is another form of the term fugue in Japan, though it is hardly used in the book.
2. Referring to [Forth International](#)

Chapter 10 - Firebird, Beyond the Sea, Medicine Bag

Later that night, after eating dinner by myself, I started practicing my bass. While practicing, I heard a loud sound of avalanching items come from the direction of the main door.

"Oohhh..... It's the ultimate bliss to die while buried under all this great music from different eras....."

At the door was Tetsurou in a suit—a rare sight—buried under a heap of collapsed CDs. He was staring at the ceiling and murmuring to himself in a daze.

"Please save up enough for me to live a well-off life before you die."

Speaking of which, I remember cleaning up quite a bit, no? No matter how hard I tried to arrange the CDs, they always stacked up higher and higher—there was no stopping them. I complained as I dug Tetsurou out of the mess.

"After I die, you must place Stravinsky's [<Firebird>](#) in my coffin. Don't go about playing [<Requiem Mass in D minor>](#) or something, just play [<St Matthew Passion>](#)! Then, I'll overwrite the record held by Jesus Christ and revive myself within two days."

"There's no need for that, just go to hell and stay there! Didn't I tell you to call me if you were drinking?"

"Ah, mmmm. Been a long while since I met up with my fellow classmates from the College of Music..... Urgg....."

The great music of different eras, as well as Tetsurou's only high-end suit, were dirtied by his sour-smelling fluids. That fella was already half-dead due to his stupor.

"Ahhhh. I'll have to send this for cleaning."

After vomiting in the toilet, Tetsurou returned with a pale face. Even after seeing how much he had dirtied his suit, he managed to say that as though it had nothing to do with him. There was only one

thing Tetsurou would dress up properly for: a concert. Due to the nature of his job, there were plenty of occasions where he had to attend a concert, and yet, that fella only had a single suit. What should I do with him? In any case, I'll fix him a cup of hot lemon juice to bring him out of his stupor.

"Uuhhhh, I'm revitalized. I'm a really lucky guy. My wife ran away from me, but God has gifted me with a son who knows how to take care of me."

Oh Mum, why didn't you fight harder for my custody?

"I've had enough of women. All five of my classmates are single, and three of them have already divorced once!"

Tetsurou was coming up with his own lyrics while singing along with the aria of <Rigoletto>—<La donna è mobile>. I covered his head with the rubbish bag to shut him up. Think about our neighbors, and stop disturbing them!^[1]

"It's the same for you with girls, yeah? You've already thrown away that guitar or whatever, right?"

"I'm still playing it! Stop treating me like an idiot!" I pointed to the bass on the sofa.

"But you suck at it, right?"

"Well, sorry about that!" That means the sound can still be heard from outside? I think, in the future, it'd be better for me not to connect my bass to the amplifier when I practice at home.

"Aww, why? Is that girl that good? Ah, it's Ebisawa Mafuyu, right? You mentioned her before. She's a good girl, yeah. You know, there's a silly saying in our circle..... See, in the case of album covers for female musicians, the picture's often taken from their side profile—especially so for the pianists. If she's pretty, the image will be a slanted profile of her face, and if she's gorgeous, the picture will be taken from the front. I've been in this job for fifteen years, and Mafuyu's the first I've seen who had her picture taken from bottom up—Eh? What's wrong, lil' Nao? Was I spot on?"

"Shut up."

I splashed a cup of water onto Tetsurou's face.

"What the heck are you doing..... lil Nao's really cold these days. Could it be that you hate me?"

"Look, Tetsurou....."

"Mmm?"

"Do you hate the so-called consumption tax?"

"Huh? Why the sudden question?"

"Just answer."

"Mmm, if you ask me whether I hate it or not..... I think I'd be better off without it, so maybe I hate it. But I've been paying consumption tax for so long, I think I've already forgotten that feeling of detest."

"Mmm, that's roughly how I feel about you."

"..... Can I cry?"

"Head outside if you wanna cry!"

Tetsurou clamped a bottle of whiskey underneath his armpit and looked as though he was really planning to go outside. Considering how he might be a nuisance to the neighbors, I stopped him immediately. Act your age and go to sleep already!

"But I don't think there's a chance between you and Ebisawa Mafuyu. Because..... well, you know you're the son of a music critic, and she knows that as well. I actually just came back from Ebichiri's concert performance in Japan. I had originally asked him to join us for a drink, but he said he'd be appearing on a live TV show, so it was expected that he'd reject us. We did talk during the banquet though. Seems like he'll be in Japan for this month, but will be travelling to a faraway place come June. Probably back to America."

"As I said, you're misunderstanding..... Eh?"

Ebichiri—Mafuyu's father—is back in Japan?

And he'll be returning to America in June. Then, the June Mafuyu's referring to..... is that?

"..... What about Mafuyu? Did you hear anything related to her?"

"Hah?"

"Nothing. So..... she'll be following him back to America?"

Around this time last year, Mafuyu was probably flying with her father to multiple places across Europe and America, for the world tour. She couldn't have done something pointless, like transferring to our school for a single month, right?

"She's probably not returning to the piano, I think. I just heard about it today as well, but it seems like the critics there had written some really nasty stuff about her. She even participated in a competition unrelated to Ebichiri, and obtained victory as well. But even then, she's still weighed down by the fame of her father."

"Ah....."

I recalled that incident when Mafuyu was staring at me, full of animosity. *"The very existence of critics is troublesome. They always write rubbish."* She indeed said something along those lines before.

"Her playing style does invite attacks though. Like, how she was not lively enough; how her playing was too calm; how horrible her presentation of the parts was; how her music was like crawling insects; or how she was overly reliant on her techniques..... even I can think up quite a few nasty critiques on the spot. And if I really wanted to, I could probably write about thirty pages commenting on her play style. But it'd be quite stupid of me if I really were to write it out—it's not like all the pieces you play would be considered good just because you played them all vibrantly."

"So that's the reason Mafuyu doesn't play the piano?"

"I don't think so. Well, it seems they also wrote things about her private life, even though they weren't related to music, just because she's the daughter of Ebichiri. You see, her mother's a Hungarian and they're divorced now."

"Ah..... So she really is a mixed blood."

I suddenly remembered the day I fixed her recorder for her. Hungary.

"Ah—you mean you didn't know about that? Well, we should stop discussing this topic. I feel like a paparazzi hounding for news."

Tetsurou popped open the whiskey bottle and drank from it directly. I no longer had the strength to stop him.

When I was a middle-school student living my life leisurely here in Japan, Mafuyu was already on the other side of the sea, under the scrutiny of the curious and hostile stares around her, living a life of fear while grabbing onto her piano tightly. What sort of life was that? I couldn't imagine it at all.

However, I was back at the initial problem once again. If she had really given up the piano, why was she playing the guitar?



The next day, as I walked into the classroom, I heard my classmates discussing yesterday's television program.

"Was the show live?"

"Yeah, seems like he's back in Japan already."

"An interview?"

"They were talking about things I didn't understand. It's not like I listen to classical music anyway."

"Do they look alike?"

"Not one bit. Princess probably takes after her mother?"

From just those bits of conversation, I immediately knew they were talking about Ebichiri. I took a glance at Mafuyu's empty seat.

"The host asked about Princess as well."

"The father and daughter are not on good terms with each other, right?"

I was thinking the whole time—you guys should know Mafuyu's about to get here soon, and yet, you people are still loudly gossiping about things related to her?

"Nao, your father was classmates with Ebichiri, right?"

"..... How did you know?"

"Maki said so! She also said, back when Ebichiri was still teaching, your father was always flirting with the girls."

Miss Maki..... please don't exaggerate those stories and spread them.

"What, so Nao really did know Princess beforehand."

"But from what I saw, Ebichiri kept trying to divert the topic whenever the host asked about his daughter. Do you know the reason for that?"

"Urm, look....."

I removed the bass from my shoulders and leaned it against my desk. Then, I mustered my determination and said,

"Stop asking about things related to her, alright?"

Everyone was looking at me with a surprised gaze. I pretended to organize my textbooks, and continued,

"Just leave her alone, okay? She's just like an injured wild kitten—if you guys get close to her, she might actually scratch you; but if you guys leave her alone, she won't bother you. That girl had her fair share of problems during the world tour in America and stuff, so—"

Just as I was saying all that, I noticed the people around me had directed their gaze in a strange direction. I could feel a prickling sensation on my shoulder blades. I turned around and saw Mafuyu standing at the door of the classroom. A slight blush appeared beneath her fair skin. Perhaps she inherited that from her Hungarian mother? Her huge eyes were staring at me—it seemed like those weren't stares of anger, but rather, of shock.

"..... Ah, look, I don't....."

I wasn't sure myself if I was trying to cook up some excuse then.

"You sure know how to spread the word around."

She murmured and made her way to her seat. Those around me had already fled in all directions.

"It's not what you're thinking."

"Please don't talk to me."

The voice of Mafuyu was like a pair of scissors, snipping away the distance between us. I could only remain quiet. Those who were around me not too long ago, were sending me flickering looks of apprehension.

Chiaki rushed into the classroom shortly after the bell had rung. As

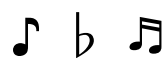
she walked past me and Mafuyu, she noticed the dangerous atmosphere.

"What's up?" She peeked at me, and then at Mafuyu. "Are you two quarreling again?"

"I have never quarreled with him before, so please do not use the term 'again.'"

Mafuyu said that as she looked away.

Chiaki was about to say something, but I tugged her sleeves and pleaded with her not to say anything.



Forget about talking, Mafuyu didn't even once look in my direction. She immediately ran out of the classroom at the start of lunch break.

"She's angry....."

"Princess is angry....."

All the reproachful murmurs, as well as the stares of my classmates, had gathered on me. It really was my fault this time, so I had no choice but to stand up and leave the classroom.

I walked to the courtyard and reached the training room of the old music building. There was no padlock hanging on the door, and the door was left ajar as well. I quietly snuck a peek in the room and saw no one inside. What's happening here?

I walked into the room and saw a guitar connected to the amplifier; the pick was randomly left on the desk. Seemed like someone, after entering, had run out of the room in a hurry. Which means, it should be fine for me to wait here for her, right? I then realized I had not thought about how I should apologize to her. Why was Mafuyu so angry with me?

As I was sitting on the cushion on the desk and thinking about how I should apologize to her, I accidentally swept the pick onto the floor with a flick of my hands. That was probably Mafuyu's pick. It wasn't until I picked it up that I realized—the shape of the pick was rather strange.

Typically speaking, picks are a thin piece of plastic shaped into a

triangle or an onigiri. However, Mafuyu's pick had a plastic loop on both sides.

I tried slipping my thumb and index finger through the plastic loops, and my fingers slid into the typical position for holding a normal pick. However, I had never seen this sort of pick before. I had seen finger picks or thumb picks that were secured onto each of the fingers before, but a pick with two loops—

"Don't touch that!"

A voice came from the direction of the door, causing me to nearly drop the pick again. Mafuyu pushed the door open with her shoulders. I put the pick back into its original position, and got off the desk.

"Urm, look..... I'm sorry."

I looked downwards and noticed she was holding a small white plastic bag in her left hand..... is that medicine?

"Are you feeling unwell somewhere?"

Mafuyu was surprised by my question, and said, "It's nothing." She then stuffed the medicine bag and the pick beneath the cushion. So she just got back from the infirmary?

"What do you want?"

Mafuyu let out a sigh as she said that, which was quite unlike how she used to yell at me to scram. It was actually much scarier for her to be behaving this way.

I was blunt with her, "I'm here to apologize to you." As I was thinking about what I should say next, Mafuyu spoke.

"Why? What are you apologizing for? Just tell everyone things about me as you please. I don't care the least bit."

"Look, I'll explain everything, so just listen to me," I said that while suppressing my anger. "Yesterday, Tetsurou—that's my father by the way—came home in a drunken state and told me about the gossip he had heard from the other critics. He said that some critics in America had written some really nasty things about you. However, he never went into detail, so—"

"Then there is no reason for you to apologize to me!"

I could feel my face burning in an instant.

"Stop picking out my words."

"What, are you here to throw your anger at me?"

"That's not it, alright?" I swallowed my words and tried my best to keep my emotions as calm as possible. "Okay, I get it. I'm here to apologize on behalf of all the critics in the world who only write rubbish."

My habit of talking nonsense had kicked in again. Mafuyu blinked her eyes in shock, and followed with an expression of surprise.

"But you're not a critic, right? Though I heard your father is."

"I'm a critic too."

Mafuyu tilted her head. Her gaze was filled with confusion.

"It's true. I've written articles under Tetsurou's name about four to five times already, and those articles were actually published in music magazines. That's why, I should be qualified to apologize to you, right?"

Mafuyu bit her lips. Not long after, she looked at the floor and shook her head,

"I don't get what you're trying to say. What are you talking about?"

She suddenly said that with a slightly trembling voice.

"Why? Why are you apologizing to me? I've done so many nasty things to you."

"So you actually realized that?"

"Idiot."

Mafuyu lifted her head. Her eyes were filled with the dull colors of the gloomy skies—they were the same as on the day I met her for the very first time. It was a damp feeling, as though a downpour were approaching.

"I don't care about those silly things. No matter how they write about me, or what they write about me, it doesn't matter. That's not it at all. I wasn't that..... wasn't that....."

I could faintly hear Mafuyu's choppy voice from afar, and I gradually found it difficult to breathe. I was thinking—just where

exactly is she? This inconceivable girl, with a dull violet aura surrounding her, should be right in front of me—but in reality, how far away is she from me? Why..... can't my voice and hands reach her?

"Why do you care about me? It's the same as back then. Why did you help me? Please, do not care about me anymore. I'm about to disappear soon anyway."

Mafuyu leaned against her guitar and sat on the desk, hugging her knees to her chest and burying her face in her arms. There was a gloomy downpour, but the rain fell only on her.



I walked out of the classroom, but I could still hear the faint sounds of the continuing downpour. However, the skies of May were irresponsibly bright, with only a cloud or two hanging above the outlines of the buildings.

I thought to myself—I must be forgetting something; I must be missing something important about Mafuyu. However, I had no idea what it was. Until then, I had thought I was beginning to understand something, but those feelings were completely swallowed up by the imaginary clouds of rain at her side. I dragged my body, which felt like it was drenched, and walked back towards the classroom.

Notes

1. 'La donna è mobile' is translated as 'Woman is fickle'.

Chapter 11 - Desert, Heart, Kashmir

Three days later, in the evening, Chiaki brought the scores to my house.

"Why haven't you come to the roof in the past few days? You went home right after school today too! Senpai's really worried about you!"

As usual, the uniformed Chiaki climbed the tree in the courtyard and squeezed in through the window of my room. She said that as she shook a stack of handwritten scores in her hand.

"Mmm....."

I twirled the wires of my headphones and vaguely answered,

"Somehow, I don't feel too motivated these days."

"That's not something someone who lacks any motivation to begin with can say."

I became even more depressed. I climbed into my bed and pulled my blanket over my head.

"Sorry, my bad."

Chiaki sat next to my pillow and pulled the blanket away from my face. She then asked,

"Did Ebisawa say something to you again?"

I didn't reply, and instead, covered my face with my pillow. Since the day I went to apologize to Mafuyu, I haven't once touched my bass. My brain was a total mess.

"Hey, are you going to say things like you wanna quit?"

"..... Maybe."

I had already prepared myself to endure Chiaki's punch or triangle choke, but instead, she looked up at the ceiling and said nothing for a long while.

"..... I thought we could finally start a band or something."

I heard her mumbling something. For a moment, I thought I was thinking too much of it. As I lifted my head to look at Chiaki's face, she pressed a score sheet into mine.

"Senpai spent so much effort converting that Beethoven piece into scores for the bass, all just for you!"

I lazily stared at the tadpoles dancing on the five-line staff.

"No, can't do it. I can't possibly play this piece of music."

"That's because you haven't practiced, right?"

Chiaki was absolutely right, so I lay myself on my bed and hid myself under the blanket. Suddenly, Chiaki pressed her entire body weight on an area near my waist, and began practicing drumming basics on my back. Crotchet, quaver, triplets, semiquaver..... she actually used her drum sticks, accurately hitting my back to the rhythm.

"Chiaki, that hurts!"

"I know."

What's with the "I know"!? What sort of answer is that! She continued drumming the rhythms on my back while maintaining a fixed tempo. Before long, my mind became lax.

"All people feel hurt if they're hit directly in their heart."

I had no idea what she was talking about. Still, I began imagining the pain of my heart being drummed on. It's probably agonizing enough to make corpses jump out of their graves in pain.

I don't know if Chiaki was getting more and more into it, but she slowly began drumming some quavers. Somehow, it felt like my head was the cymbal and my right hand, the floor tom. Wait, stop—Miss Chiaki, that really hurts! Before long, the piece suddenly entered the chorus. She began lightly rapping semiquavers on my left shoulder, which served as a replacement for the snare drum.

"Chiaki, wait, that hurts! I said it hurts!"

I kept moving about beneath the blanket, but my opponent was a retired black belt in Judo—she knew exactly where she needed to apply force to render me immobile. In the end, I had to wait till she

finished drumming the whole piece before I was freed from beneath her butt.

"Do you know what song that was?"

Chiaki asked me that question after I finally managed to escape from under the blanket. A naughty smile appeared on her face.

"Unicorn's <Hige to Boin>?"^[1]

"Oh, you're quite sharp."

Though such cases are rare, just like the how <Stand by Me> can be recognized just by the bass line, some songs can be recognized instantly just by listening to the drums. Actually, this miracle might've happened purely because Chiaki and I had grown up listening to similar music since our days in kindergarten, before Unicorn disbanded.

"But sadly, the answer is <Asia no Junshin>."

"So you're just toying with me!?" To think I had thought of it as a miracle—doesn't that make me an idiot?

"Not at all. We still have to do our best, even if life is boring! I'll root for you, just a little."

With that, she grabbed the shoes she had placed on my desk, and jumped out the window..... why can't you just leave through the main door?

I was alone yet again. I sat on my bed and picked up the scores Chiaki left behind. The theme was really simple and the tempo was quite slow as well—I thought I could probably play it right off the bat. Up till the point where the second, third and fourth voices gradually overlapped, there was no change in the difficulty of the part I was supposed to play. However, the variation before that was much more complicated, and for the fugue, I actually had to play a melody as difficult as Mafuyu's, right till the very end. That's just impossible no matter how you look at it! I tossed the scores aside, lay down, and stared at the ceiling for a while. My back was still a little sore from Chiaki's drumming.

Things like how the pieces were too difficult, or how I had no motivation at all—they were all excuses. I knew that perfectly well. So, Chiaki might've known as well. I was just ashamed of myself. I

didn't understand the situation surrounding Mafuyu at all, and yet, I enthusiastically challenged her to a fight. To get back the classroom so I could kill time after school—just for something as stupid as that? What an idiot I was. But that was even more reason why I couldn't give up at a point like this, or else I'd become an even bigger idiot than I already was.

I quickly grabbed the scores and went to the living room to take my bass out from its case.

As I was tuning the instrument, a string suddenly snapped in two. It felt like it was telling me I couldn't possibly do it.

I lay on the sofa and planned to just sleep it off, but the area on my back where Chiaki had drummed began to hurt again. And so, I stuffed the scores in the case, lifted the case onto my back and walked out the main door.



The skies were already growing dark when I reached Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store. Through a gap about as wide as a pencil, I could see all sorts of guitars displayed in the shop; they were glowing under the display lights. Somehow, the scene felt so nostalgic I almost teared from my eyes. I had only gone to the shop once, so why did I feel that way?

Kagurazaka-senpai was tending the store alone, as there were no customers. She was on the other side of the counter. Using a piece of yellow cloth, she carefully and tenderly cleaned the neck of a guitar that had its strings removed.

"Young man, here I am thinking it was about time for you to come! I'm really happy, yeah?"

Upon noticing me, she put the guitar down and stood up.

"You're here to buy strings for your bass, right?"

I jumped in shock and nodded my head in a daze. How did Senpai know?

"There's something I'll have to apologize to you for."

As she said that, she took out the bass strings from a rack and

brought them to the side of the counter, which housed a lot of compartments.

"..... Which is?"

"I actually did something to the third string, so that it would snap more easily."

"Haa?" I gave a strange cry. "Why did you do that?"

"You burn-out really easily, right? I thought you might coop yourself up in your house if you started to get tired of it halfway through. If your string happened to snap right then..... See, isn't that a perfect excuse for you to come see me?"

"So let me pay for that!" Senpai smiled as she took three thousand-yen bills out of her wallet and put them in the cash register. Compared to strings for the guitar, strings for the bass are shockingly pricey, but the shop owners always help you change them. I was surprised, and for a moment, I couldn't speak. I had always thought tuning would cause the strings to wear easily, but in actual fact, the strings don't break that readily?

"What did you plan to do if I decided to give up on the bass because of the broken string?"

"Then there'd be nothing else I could do. I had thought about it before—I'll give up if things are not fated to be. However, you still came running to me, right?"

Senpai said that with a smiling face, so there was nothing much for me to say.

"You got the score?"

I nodded my head and took the score—which was hand-notated by Senpai—out from my bass case.

"So, you're not here to complain about how the score is too difficult for you, right?"

"No..... nothing." I moved my eyes away and cooked up a lie.

"How far have you played?"

"..... Up to about the fourth variation, but I've been stuck there ever since. I couldn't play the fugue at all, and I don't even think it's possible for me to do so."

Senpai quickly finished tuning the newly-strung bass and began to play the fugue while sitting on the counter. I listened to it with a complicated feeling.

The music that came from Mafuyu's guitar felt like it was directly shaved out from a giant pillar of ice. In contrast, Kagurazaka-senpai's performance felt like the frozen rays of winter—her music appears all of a sudden, and pierces right through the clouds. It was really unbelievable to hear such clear sounds flow smoothly, without any hiccups.

After she was done with her performance, Senpai returned the bass to me. For a while, I couldn't bring myself to face her.

"It's not that hard! I didn't use any special techniques either. Just reduce the tempo by half, and carefully play through each and every note."

"Senpai....."

I quietly muttered that with my head still lowered.

"Hmm?"

"Why can't you recruit Mafuyu by yourself? You play better than me anyway."

"Didn't I tell you already? It has to be you."

I shook my head weakly.

"Even if it's me, I can't converse much with Mafuyu either. She's not willing to tell me anything, and all I do is make her angry....."

Senpai took two round stools out from behind the counter, and placed them in the aisle displaying the guitars. She then pressed on my shoulders to make me sit down.

"It's not just that."

"..... Eh?" I lifted my head. Senpai shifted her sight away from my face slightly, letting her gaze slowly float upwards.

"That's not all there is to it. You see, before I knew about the existence of Ebisawa Mafuyu, I had already known about you."

I gradually found it difficult to breathe. What's Senpai talking about now?

"Young man, you're familiar with a music magazine called 'Friends of Musicians,' right? In the July issue, two years back, I read a critique that was published in it; the title was, 'Handel and the verses in the bible.' The article's roughly about how Handel's pieces, including those that aren't music, can all be interpreted as verses. Even though the logic's a little far-fetched, it still felt rather amazing. It's a rather touching article."

I was still dazed as I hugged my bass tightly with my arms.

Of course I know that article. It's because, that critique—

"I took a look at the name of the writer: it was Hikawa Tetsurou, a critic whom I was very familiar with. However, something didn't feel quite right. The article was written in English simple enough for middle school students to read, and the examples cited in it should not have existed in the middle school education Hikawa Tetsurou should have received, as he was already in his forties."

"Ah....."

There's..... There's actually someone who notices something like that?

"That strange feeling caused me to shift my suspicion to the whole article. I brought out older magazines and scrutinized them, rereading every single critique written by Hikawa Tetsurou. Somehow, a few articles stood out from the rest, and all these articles shared the same weird feeling as well. I also searched through a few CD reviews and managed to find one for [Finlandia](#), played by Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and conducted by Karajan in 1959."

I gulped. My dry throat was sore.

"However, I couldn't find any more concrete evidence after that, and I didn't know anyone from the publisher either. All I knew was that Hikawa Tetsurou had a child. Because, for some unknown reason, he had written about his son in quite a few of his articles, and had even written out his name. Therefore, when I saw that name in the booklet containing the names of all the newcomers—I guess you can understand how shocked I was, right?"

With a light smile on her face, Senpai prodded my nose with her

finger.

"The criminal is you."

"..... Urm, what do you mean by criminal?"

"All my deductions are correct, right?"

Senpai suddenly moved her face close to mine, and I could only nod my head.

There was actually someone in this world who, just by reading the articles alone, could identify the articles I had written under Tetsurou's name.

"Therefore, I had already been paying attention to you for a long time, young man. I need a secretary in my revolutionary army, and I can't think of anyone that's more suitable for that position than you. Thus, I'm not asking you to just join along the way as I try to recruit Ebisawa Mafuyu."

Senpai placed her hands on my shoulders.

"—I want you."

Don't say something like that to me when you're at such a close distance and when we're all alone. My mind was a mess, and I couldn't say anything. In order to avoid Senpai's gaze, I turned my head away and packed my bass.

"However, for someone like me....."

I confirmed the touch of my case.

"It's not like the band will benefit from me joining. I can't play as well as Mafuyu, and I'll probably never catch up to her. All this time, I've..... always been listening to music by myself."

Senpai narrowed her eyes and stared at me for quite a while. She then suddenly diverted her gaze, and yelled behind me.

"Comrade Aihara, it's about time you show yourself. Want to come in?"

I turned my head around in shock. Chiaki was standing in the shadows of the few guitars next to the door. She quietly showed herself. There was a gentle expression on her face.

"You must have stalked young man all the way here, right? As

expected of a fighter in my revolutionary army. You're quite adept at stealth missions as well."

"I didn't stalk him." Chiaki said that angrily and stomped all the way over.

"Senpai, you can't say things that'll frighten Nao!"

"That jealous look of yours is really cute too!"

Senpai patted Chiaki's head lovingly. I looked at Chiaki with a dumbfounded expression.

Did she really stalk me all the way here? Is that really true or not?

Chiaki glared at me while saying, "I just so happened to come here to take a look around, and it just so happened that Nao was already inside, so it was inconvenient for me to enter." Senpai consoled her by saying, "I understand, I understand."

"Comrade Aihara, did you bring your drum sticks along?"

"..... Drum sticks?" Chiaki tilted her head, then nodded.

"Mmm. I'll go wake up the sleeping store manager inside and borrow the key to the studio."

Senpai shifted her gaze to me, then formed a gun with her hand and fired a pretend shot at my chest.

"Young man, let me light your passion ablaze."



The third floor of Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store was modified into a studio for rent. There were two tightly-shut doors along the long and narrow passageway. After opening the door before me, I was greeted by a room four-and-a-half-tatami big. About half the room was occupied by the drums, with two giant guitar amplifiers standing on each side. There were also mikes and recording equipment, as well as an asphyxiating smell of smoke.

"I've specially allowed you guys in, all thanks to the benefits I receive as an employee here." And with that, Kagurazaka-senpai pushed me into the studio. Chiaki followed as well.

"Whoa— it's been a long time since I've played on real drums."

Chiaki sat in the middle of the drum set and was tuning the snare drum rather happily.

Kagurazaka-senpai then connected my bass and her guitar to the amplifiers. Senpai's guitar was a Gibson Les Paul, which was said to cost a million yen—though I had no idea whether that was true or not. If so, that was probably part of the old "Historic Collection" series. From the colors of the guitar, it should have been a replica of the 60's series?

I slung the strap of the bass across my shoulder, then plucked the string once timidly. An unbearable noise filled the small and cramped studio.

For some strange reason, I was led into this studio by her, just like that.....

"There's no need for you to play something that's overly difficult, young man. You just have to follow the drums and play D in quavers, that's all."

"Haa."

Chiaki lifted her drum sticks high into the air and said, "Senpai, are you ready?"

The two of them exchanged glances for a second. At the exact instant the sound of the cymbals disappeared, I became surrounded by music that moved forward at a heavy pace. Chiaki began to hit a series of powerful quavers with the hi-hat, and on the drums, she was overlapping the quavers with triplets. The slowly-rising and screeching guitar riffs were like the faltering footsteps of a traveler heading towards the sea with a cane in his hand.

I tried tapping along to Chiaki's rhythm, then quietly strummed the bass. Initially, I couldn't believe that the low notes that were pressing up against my abdomen were actually coming from my bass. The three different melodies began to blend together stiffly, and entwined —

Then came the sound of a singing voice—

It was the voice of Kagurazaka-senpai.

It was like the whispers of the night in the desert—though her voice was slightly hoarse, it transmitted all the way to the horizon at the

other end.

It was Led Zeppelin's <Kashmir>.

It was a song that I had heard countless times. I listened to this song in bed—deep in the middle of the night—on repeat, a countless number of times. And now, my fingers were etching out the pulse of the song.

In the areas the song fell silent, the guitar replied with a similar phrase of music. Chiaki maintained her footsteps and marched on continuously and endlessly. I already erased whatever Senpai had told me from my mind. When the guitar began playing the winding stretches of the Arabian-style music, I began searching for the low notes hidden within the song, and wove them out with my fingertips.



I really felt the song could continue on forever.

That was why, when the song finally stopped, I felt as though I were left alone in a desolate desert. The room was filled with a

rumbling sound, but I could no longer determine whether that was just the noise, the echoes, or the memories of <Kashmir> that had seeped into my ears.

Chiaki's face was flushed red, and she stared at me, her forehead filled with sweat. A seemingly triumphant smile appeared on her face. I turned my sight away, and this time, the graceful sight of Kagurazaka-senpai appeared before my eyes.

I don't know why—but I couldn't look right into her face.

"..... Young man, what do you think the bass is?"

I slowly lifted my head. There was no smile on Senpai's face, but her gaze was gentle.

"If we're to view the band as a person, then the lead singer would be the head, and the guitar, the hands....."

Senpai moved her sight away from her hands and directed it towards Chiaki.

"If the drums were the legs, then which part do you think the bass represents?"

I couldn't answer Senpai's riddle. From the moment I was born, up till now, I had always assumed the role of someone who simply accepted things.

Senpai finally broke into a gentle smile, and quickly walked towards me. She placed her palm on my chest, which made me jump in shock. My body froze.

"It's this, young man."

As we stared face to face, Senpai looked straight into my eyes and continued,

"The heart. You understand now? Without you, we would not be able to move."

I was stunned speechless. I replied to her, not through words, but through the pulse of my heart.

If I were to view the band as a person.

I was not moving forward by following in their footsteps. As someone who placed himself in a sound shared with others for the

very first time, that was something I was certain of. If I were to listen to the CD alone in my room, I probably would've never understood that.

Right then, I was probably thinking the same thing as Senpai. If only Mafuyu were here—

The sound of that guitar. If only it were here—

I gripped the neck of my bass tightly. I finally understood—that was my reason for playing the bass. It wasn't an excuse, but an actual reason—it was so I could transmit this blazing heat to Mafuyu.

Notes

1. [Unicorn](#) is a jap rock band

Chapter 12 - Memories, Promise, Excuses

The following two weeks passed by in a flash as we engrossed ourselves in our practice, and before long, the end of May had arrived. The skin on my left fingertips was hard like dried soil. Because the strings of the bass are much thicker than those of the guitar, the positions of the calluses on my fingers were slightly different from those on Kagurazaka-senpai's.

"You look more like a bassist now."

Senpai couldn't help but let out a loud laugh when our fingertips came into contact like in the scene with the alien in E.T. However, the calluses had slightly changed my sense of touch—which affected my work when I was doing something delicate with machines—so they were a little inconvenient.

However, before issuing a challenge to Mafuyu, there was a matter that required me to utilize my hobby of fooling around with machines.

On the fourth Thursday of May, I ran straight to the courtyard after school. At the same time, Chiaki tried to stall Mafuyu by any means possible—though, optimistically speaking, she could probably only keep her for about twenty minutes. I'd have to win this battle with speed. I started with picking the padlock, which took me less than a minute. Then, I turned the handle slightly, as usual, and opened the lock to enter the room. Replaying the imaginary scenarios I had run through my head earlier, I took the tools and wires out of my bag and began to work on the amplifier. I swiftly opened the back cover, bringing the internals of the machine into full view. I had worked on the amplifiers several times before, so rewiring the circuits wasn't much of a problem; it was hiding the newly-extended wire that took up the bulk of the time.

After everything was done, I locked the padlock. Just as I was about to round the corner to return to the main building, I accidentally bumped into Mafuyu.

The two of us just stood there without moving. Neither of us had our eyes focused on the other party.

Ever since that day, we hardly spoke to each other. Because of that, those fellas in class were complaining about how their only source of information regarding the Princess was blocked off. However, none of them knew the details behind the situation.

As I began to walk past her, Mafuyu spoke.

"Have you..... given up already?"

"..... Eh?"

"Bass. You used to play it on the roof."

"I'm still playing it, yeah? It's just that I've been practicing on the roof of the northern building, because I don't wanna disturb someone who has unexceptionally sharp ears."

"Liar. I looked for you there as well, but you weren't around."

That was indeed a lie. Recently, I've been going to Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store to get a bassist, whom Senpai knew, to take a look at and oversee my practice. As I had no intention of letting her know about my fervent practicing, I wove that lie.

"..... You just said you looked for me? What do you mean by that?"

"Ah, that's..... you don't have to mind that, it's nothing. I'm just slightly worried."

Mafuyu's voice became even more anxious, and she shook her head repeatedly.

"I'm just wondering..... if you are still thinking about that incident back then?"

I jumped in shock, and turned around. It seemed like Mafuyu was finding it difficult to speak, and she kept staring at her fingers.

"Please forget about that. I'm totally fine, so you do not have to be concerned about it."

Please forget it. I've heard that countless times from Mafuyu already.

I felt a slight anger stirring within me. I guess I'll just tell her my

feelings truthfully—

"Look, what do you think the human brain is? Our brains aren't like some hard disk; do you think a simple 'Memory delete' from you will make me go, 'Oh, like this?' and I'll forget everything?"

Mafuyu's eyes widened, and she took a step back.

"I forgot nothing, and in fact, I remember everything clearly. You said, 'Do you think you can catch up to me by playing the bass?' Well, let's have a showdown tomorrow after school."

"..... What do you mean by 'have a showdown'?"

"A showdown between my bass and your guitar, that's what. If I can keep up with you all the way till the end, in terms of playing, then it'll be my victory. If I win, I'll be allowed to use that room. And if I lose, I'll never get close ever again."

"Are you serious..... about that?"

Of course! But I said nothing more, and walked past Mafuyu just like that.

To be honest, I wasn't even remotely confident about winning. But Kagurazaka-senpai did say before, that she'd make me win the showdown; therefore, it wasn't "I will win," but "she will make victory mine."

A person who'd use all sorts of (underhanded?) methods to get her hands on whatever she wants—a chill ran down my spine when I considered the fact that those few words from her mouth were enough to grant me so much courage. I guess the only person I can depend on right now is her.



"Young man, you've become quite good with words."

Kagurazaka-senpai said that to me when I reached the roof. It seemed she had watched us from the fence.

"I really can't believe you were that born loser three weeks ago."

"Don't call me a born loser!" I shifted my sight away from Senpai. I had no idea why, but ever since that day, I felt rather embarrassed whenever I looked straight at her.

"When I really think about it, there's nothing for me to lose in this showdown. I can't currently use that practice room anyway, so nothing changes even if I lose. It's just like the rock-paper-scissors match I had with Senpai back then."

Half the reason for that sort of twisted thinking was self-mockery. However, Senpai sat down next to me while hugging the bass, and flashed me a satisfied smile.

"So you still remember what I did during that match."

I looked at the side of Senpai's face and nodded my tilted head. Back then, Senpai declared a match against me, and held a pick in-between her index finger and middle finger. Upon seeing that, I thought she was trying to trick me into thinking she wouldn't throw scissors, so I just went for it—with my brain a huge mess, I threw out rock. In the end, I lost to Senpai. However, Senpai laughed loudly and said,

"Actually, I wasn't trying to read your thoughts so I could use them against you. Even if I did that, it wouldn't increase the odds of me winning such a simple game. What do you think is the surefire method of winning rock-paper-scissors?"

"Eh?" That means Senpai had used a sure-win strategy?

"It's simple. Just throw out last."

"Huh?"

"There was actually no special reason for holding the pick in-between my fingers, other than to confuse you so you'd throw out your choice at my tempo. That was all. Remember this well: the sure-win strategy is to go last."

I was shocked speechless, and just stared at Senpai's triumphant face. Then, I let out a long sigh in-between my knees. It was impossible. Right from the very beginning, I had no chance of winning against someone like her.

"It has always been said that battles are won long before they have even started—that's exactly what it means by that. Which means, how you lure your opponent into your territory is of critical importance. Oh right, do you know the reason I chose this song for your showdown against Mafuyu? I'll tell you."

With that, she took the scores out of a file in a case behind us, and spread the sheets out before us. She then said, "There are four reasons why I picked this piece."

"You should've told me right at the beginning!" That thought flashed past my mind for a brief moment. For the past few days, I had asked myself, while practicing, "Why this piece?" However, after listening to Senpai's lengthy explanation, I could only answer with a sigh.

"—So, are you slowly believing that you have a chance of winning this?"

"Mmm..... A little."

I answered truthfully. The chance of me winning has increased multiple folds—it's 0.2% now! That's probably how I feel right now. Senpai bumped her shoulder into mine as she laughed.

"That's good enough! Only you will know how your battle will unfold. All I know are the results of my own battles, because I won't be taking part in the battle between you two."

"If you took my place, you'd win..... is that what Senpai is trying to say?"

I asked weakly. Senpai answered me with a slightly angry voice.

"Could I actually win?"

I looked at Senpai's face in shock.

"Didn't I say already? It has to be you."

I couldn't reply to that, so I lowered my head again.

Senpai suddenly took out a piece of paper and used it to poke the tip of my nose.

"Well then, this is the final preparation. Sign this first so you're mentally prepared for it. This copy's for Ebisawa Mafuyu."

I lifted my head to take a look. It was the application form for joining a club, printed out on coarse paper—there were two of them. For both the applications, the words "Folk Music Research Club" were written neatly—using a pen—in the box where the applicant was supposed to provide the name of the club of interest.

I shifted my eyes away and tried to divert the topic.

"Urm..... I guess I'll just..... keep these two forms for now."

"Why? I've already taught you so much about the bass. Could it be..... that you actually hate me? Is that it?"

Please don't look at me with such a sorrowful expression. You're obviously faking it.

"Mmm, how should I put it?"

I lifted the bass off my knees.

"I don't feel I'm qualified. The standards of both Senpai and Chiaki are too high for me."

"I said it before already, didn't I? I'm not asking you to follow us. We will be the ones to follow you."

Because the bass is the heart. I know that, but still.....

"Still, I can't decide if I'm going to join the club or not. At least, not for now. Therefore....."

I lifted the bass and stared at its strings.

"Therefore, if I manage to win against Mafuyu and make her join the club....."

"If you can beat her, you'll join us too?"

I nodded in reply.

If it wasn't like that, I'd definitely regret it. It somehow felt like I had no say in everything that was laid out before me.

"Then..... what will you do if you lose?" That sentence from Senpai left me breathless due to shock. I hadn't thought about that.

However, I have to make my decision right now.

"..... If I lose, I'll continue to play the bass—however, I won't join the club. Senpai has been looking after me this whole time, so I can't bring myself to say things like..... 'please allow me to join the club even if I lose.'"

After a short moment of silence, I could hear Senpai let out a gentle sigh next to me.

"I've only come to understand this recently, but you are a man with

really strong self-esteem."

She showed a gentle smile. I could barely keep my eyes open any longer, and shifted my gaze away after a brief look at her face.

"We'll treat this as a promise between us, for the day that's still faraway. Yeah, let's do just that."

Senpai took a screwdriver out of my bag—without my consent—and removed the back cover of my bass. She folded the two application forms in half and stuffed them into the empty space between all the wiring. She then screwed the cover back in place.

"..... Why are you putting them in a place like that?"

"Try listening to it. There should be the faint sound of the papers rubbing against each other."

I placed the bass back on my knees. Then, Senpai strummed the strings. The sound of the papers rubbing against each other—

"Nope, I hear nothing?"

"But I can hear it!" Your ears are comparable to those of a cat. "And maybe Ebisawa Mafuyu can hear it too. She's really sensitive to the sound of paper rubbing against each other, right? These minute sounds may affect her subconsciously, causing her to become uneasy and frustrated."

There was such logic behind it?

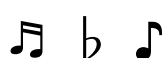
"If you want to be a little more superstitious, it's a sort of spell. Just like how the samurais sewed amulets of protection on their clothes."

Senpai patted my bass.

"Our promise will be with you the whole time. So don't you forget it."

After a moment of hesitation, I nodded.

"I wish you good luck."



I just so happened to meet Miss Maki on my way home. After walking into the ordinary carriage, which stopped at every station,

she asked,

"Seems like you've been chatting with Mafuyu quite a lot recently?"

I shrunk my head as I grabbed the overhead handles. I had been caught by a troublesome person.

"No, you can't quite consider that chatting."

"Just be straightforward and tell her you'd love to share that room with her. Why are all the boys so indirect?"

You think I could say that? Me? To Mafuyu?

"And also, what have you been doing recently? Seems like you've been together with the second-year Kagurazaka quite a lot, right?"

"Oh, well....."

With her vice grip grabbing the back of my collar, I had no choice but to tell her the truth.

"A guitar showdown?"

Miss Maki suddenly let out a strange sound, resulting in the rest of the passengers directing their attention to us.

"Should I say you're stupid, or that you're similar to Kagurazaka....."

Miss Maki let out a sigh as she voiced her thoughts. Was Kagurazaka-senpai that famous among the teachers as well? She didn't seem to attend any lessons, so perhaps, she was one of those so-called "problematic students" or something?

"And Mafuyu said she was okay with the proposal? How's that possible?"

"No, she was just stunned."

"Yeah, that's more like it! Then, what are you going to do? Do you really want to do this?"

"Sigh, there are a lot of reasons behind this..... but I'll put my best into it."

I replied vaguely. I couldn't possibly tell Miss Maki about the various things we did to make Mafuyu participate in the showdown.

Miss Maki knitted her beautiful pair of eyebrows for a moment, and

pressed her finger against her temple.

"Look..... I'm very grateful to you for interacting with Mafuyu, but don't provoke her too much. She's a really delicate girl."

"Oh."

Even if she told me that..... for some unknown reason, I couldn't help but get angry at how she wanted me to be gentle towards Mafuyu. That lass has said many terrible things to me you know?

"Mmm....." Miss Maki crossed her arms in front of her chest. Her expression suggested that she didn't know what she should say. "I think, the majority of the problems are due to a certain psychological issue she has. Therefore—"

"..... What do you mean? What's this 'psychological issue' that Miss Maki's referring to?"

Miss Maki stared at me without saying a single word. She then mumbled to herself in a hoarse voice, "If it's Nao, it should be fine telling him....." But she immediately shook her head and canceled that thought of hers.

"I can't be the one to tell you this. It'd be best if Mafuyu was willing to tell you about it."

Psychological issues. I recalled the time Mafuyu was holding a bag of medicine tightly in her hands.

So Mafuyu was really sick? I couldn't quite see that from the outside, but if—

"Urm, Miss Maki....." I thought of something else and decided to ask her about it. "Mafuyu..... I heard she's about to transfer away soon. Is that true?"

"Transfer? Why?"

"..... Ah, nothing."

She was disappearing in June. But..... what did that actually mean? I said nothing, and once again sank into my own thoughts. In any case, Mafuyu said nothing to me at all.

"A showdown through guitars huh..... that's youth for you! But that may be a good thing as well."

Miss Maki smiled as she gazed into the distance.

"Mafuyu has no intention of making friends. So even though it might be slightly unreasonable for me to support this, it's quite a good idea to force her to join a club. And if she joins, I'll be the adviser for your club!"

"So you think..... I can win?"

"No, not at all."

Miss Maki answered immediately. I gripped the handle hard and slumped my head in disappointment.

"However, I heard she only started playing the guitar half a year ago."

"Really?" She can achieve such skill in just half a year? God is really unfair.

"Still, everyone will go through things like this, right? There are times when you just have to do the things you need to do. All the best, my boy. If you make Mafuyu cry, though, I won't let you off the hook so easily."

With that, Miss Maki gave me a hard slap on the back.



That night, Tetsurou wasn't home. I received a short message from him via cellphone: "I'm drinking with a friend, so I probably won't be home tonight." I was thinking of asking him a few more things about Mafuyu, but that guy was never around at the most crucial moments.

I returned to my room and sat on my bed. After placing the bass on my legs, my fingers began to unconsciously strum the strings. I then realized I was playing the bass of that piano concerto unknowingly.

It was the piece Mafuyu was playing at the junkyard on the day we first met.

I went into Tetsurou's room and began stacking the CDs of the various piano concertos of the late romantic era, then brought them all into the living room. I spent the whole night listening to the CDs without pause, to the point that I even skipped my dinner. However, I

didn't manage to locate the track in my memory. That wasn't surprising though, as there are a few thousand piano concertos.

I switched the sound system off and gave up on trying to find it.

I suddenly remembered my declaration to Mafuyu when I was tuning my bass: "If I lose, I'll never get close ever again." That line suddenly appeared in my mind, but wow. What the heck was I saying? What I meant was that I'll never get close to that room, and that I'll never get close to Mafuyu, right? And since our seats are right next to each other, it will be impossible for me not to be close to her, right? In the end, I was endlessly trying to explain things to some random unknown person in my mind.

What would happen if I lost? I kept thinking that.

My excuse for talking to Mafuyu would disappear along with that as well, right?

And I did say I wouldn't join the Folk Music Research Club if I lost. That was because I would have no confidence in starting a band with Senpai and Chiaki should that happen.

I recalled the song we played in the recording room that day—<Kashmir>. It was a wonderfully sweet experience that left me breathless; it felt like my body was burning in flames.

There was nothing to lose—what an incredibly huge lie that was.

Unknown to me, there were many things around me that I might end up losing, things I didn't want to lose.

If I lost—

I shook my head and threw that thought out of my mind. It was pointless to think about all that now.

Tomorrow—I could only do my best and rock on.

Chapter 13 - Eroica

The skies, on the last Friday of May, were filled with dark clouds. I couldn't fall asleep, so I headed to school early in the morning. As soon as I entered the classroom, I was immediately surrounded by my classmates.

"I heard you're gonna have a showdown with the Princess today?"

"What? What do you mean by showdown? What'll happen if he loses?"

"Perhaps he'll be her slave for life?" "Then isn't that the same as things are now?"

My face turned green after hearing everyone say things like that.

"Urm..... Well..... Why..... does everyone know about this?"

"Didn't you talk to Ebisawa in the courtyard yesterday?"

"You guys saw?"

"The atmosphere was quite nice, but you just had to say something like having a showdown. The audience was really disappointed!"

It's not like we were putting on a show there.

"So, when are you guys competing? Competing in what? What does the winner get?"

Ah, so they didn't hear the part about having the showdown later after school? That was fantastic. Despite trying to divert the topic, I still ended up telling them everything other than the place and time of the showdown.

"A new club? With Ebisawa? And Aihara? And Kagurazaka-senpai too?"

Why are they so damn excited?

"The Kagurazaka-senpai you're referring to is the one in second-year?"

"Yeah, the one who looks like the head of a band of female ninjas."

What sort of analogy is that? I can't understand that at all! Then

again, is Senpai *that* well known at school?

"Starting a band in that small room together with those three girls? Nao! That's unforgivable, so you better lose!"

"I'd rather you win. Then I'll take over your place in the band."
"Yeah, you definitely must win, and then I'll join too." "You know nuts about instruments, right?" "I can be in charge of moving the instruments." "Then..... I'll be in charge of wiping their sweat."
"Somehow, I'm feeling more and more motivated."

And then they actually started singing our school song—I felt like I should just run out of the room. As they were discussing the time of the showdown, Chiaki walked into the classroom. Everyone became silent. I'm saved.....

"Are you guys saying bad stuff about me?"

A few guys flashed an awkward smile before returning to their seats. Seemed like everyone had finally learned one of the basic etiquettes of society: to not gossip about someone right in front of the person herself.

During lunch break, my desk was filled with sauce cutlet bread, which the guys purchased from the store—seemed like they were all praying for my victory. But how can I possibly finish this much bread!

"Nao, you mustn't lose."

"Though I'm not too sure about what's happening, you must definitely win!" One by one, they grabbed my shoulders and cheered me on. I just stared blankly at the pyramid of sauce cutlet bread. It wasn't like there was zero chance of me fulfilling their expectations, but with everyone being that excited about it, I was honestly quite troubled.



After school, I brought my bass to the roof. Senpai wanted me to go there first, before the showdown, but I didn't see her around when I got there. Then again, I recall she has work today? I then spotted something on the floor, near the fence where Senpai usually sat. I walked over to take a look. It was John Lennon's album of covers, <Rock 'n' Roll>. The second song of the CD was simply

titled <Stand by Me>. I took out my discman and placed the CD inside. As I listened to the hoarse voice of John Lennon, I looked downwards through the fence and waited. I took out a piece of unfinished sauce cutlet bread and stuffed it in my mouth.

Halfway into the song, I suddenly remembered that Mafuyu would always head straight home on Fridays. Shit, I had actually forgotten that.

But just then, the back of a girl, together with her maroon-colored hair, came into sight. I was at ease. What's going on? She doesn't have to do what she usually needs to do?

I continued to let the song flow from my earpieces and into my body, even as I watched Mafuyu walk into the practice room. I grabbed hard onto the fence and stood there motionlessly, till John Lennon's voice faded away.

I switched off my discman and grabbed my bass.



When I reached the practice room, I heard Mafuyu playing Beethoven's bagatelle on the other side of the door. I stopped in my tracks and thought about how I should enter the room. I came up with various lame ideas, such as kicking the door open with my foot and yelling, "Sorry to disturb!" But in the end, I decided to just knock on the door.

The bagatelle suddenly stopped, as if it were shocked motionless.

The uncomfortable silence was like a gush of bone-chilling cold air that seeped through the gaps. It persisted for quite a while.

"Urm....." I was the first to talk, but I had no idea what to say. "I'm here to compete with you. I told you about it yesterday, right?"

The door opened.

Mafuyu's guitar was slung across her shoulders. She looked at me, then lowered her gaze.

"..... You really came."

From Mafuyu's tone, I could sense something was not quite right. Somehow, she was different than usual.

"As the representative of rock, I'm here to take revenge on the stubborn classical supremacist."

"You idiot! Are you serious about this? You didn't even know how to do the hammer-on a few days ago."

Don't belittle me. Then again, why does she even know something like that?

"You peeked at me while I was practicing?"

"N-No."

With her face flushed red, Mafuyu slammed the door shut with her two hands.

"— Why do you have to do such a thing? Do you really want to use this room that badly?"

Why do I keep doing such things? Ah, I don't even know myself.

Senpai said it is for love and revolution.

Chiaki asked before, *"You're very concerned about Ebisawa, right?"*

I don't know. But I can't allow things to go on like this.

Mafuyu said from the other side of the door,

"Just do whatever you wish over there! I don't care anymore."

Just this once, I chose to remain silent.

Oh well. I already knew things would turn out like this.

I took out my bass, plugged in the cable, then squatted down near the door. There was a hole beneath the hinge of the door that I could directly plug my cable into. This was the result of my fifteen minutes of work yesterday—a cable that extended from the amplifiers to the door.

Just as I was about to hijack the stereo device, my hand stopped. For some unknown reason, I suddenly remembered a certain piece of music history that Tetsurou had once told me, half in jest.

It started with a small stream in Germany. The river flowed into a beet plantation, then later spread throughout all of Europe. It clashed with the local music, ending up either becoming engulfed by the music, or swallowing the music instead. It then flowed into the seas,

and spread throughout the world. That's how a lot of things in this world are born, and rock is one of them.

Therefore, if we sought out the history of invasion and integration that spanned three hundred years, we'd find that all things were linked to each other.

I plugged the cable into the hole.

In that instant, a sharp screech blared out from the amplifiers on the other side of the door.

I could almost see the frightened looks of Mafuyu.

"What have you done?"

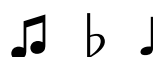
She found out. In reply, I turned the volume on my bass to the maximum. The room filled with feedback.

"Hey, what are you do—"

In order to drown out her voice, I played the opening note of the piece. *Allegretto vivace*. I must not play too quickly—as if I were stepping on the floor with force, but at the same time, seeking for a place to step with my toes. Use the low notes to stomp out the boundaries of the octave, then retreat back a little with slightly hesitant steps.

I could hear Mafuyu holding her breath in shock. Of course, she should know what piece this was, just from those eight bars. She had released an album with this piece in it two years ago in February. I had listened to that CD many times, to the point that the CD was close to being damaged.

It was Beethoven's 35th piece, <Variations and Fugue for Piano in E ♭ major>—the variations were later used in his <Symphony No. 3>. There was another title for this piano piece: **<Eroica Variations>**.



Back then—

Kagurazaka-senpai told me there were four reasons for choosing that piece.

"As you can see....." Senpai began pointing at the scores as she

explained on. "This is a piece that starts off with a single melody at low pitch. Only the bass will play in the opening thirty-two bars—she will definitely recognize this as <Eroica> straight away. With this, we'll be able to fire the first salvo and pull the opponent into our music."

With that, Senpai tapped the tempo on the score with her finger.

"It's allegretto vivace, so don't ever go too fast. One of Ebisawa Mafuyu's weapons is her ability to strum her guitar accurately at great speeds. Should the showdown turn into a situation in which speed will decide the victor..... young man, you will lose all chances of winning. However, you can set the speed of the whole piece with the opening thirty-two bars—that's the first reason I chose this piece."

"But....." There was a hint of uneasiness in my voice. "At this part that leads to the overture, there's a place where the four voices merge, and the melody after that will be led by Mafuyu! If she starts to rush then....."

"Young man, all you're thinking about are the areas where you might lose....."

Senpai shook her head and let out a sigh. I curled my body up. I'm sorry, but I'm a born loser.

"Don't worry. This is the second reason why I chose this piece. This variation....."

Senpai scanned through the scores quickly. A variation is a section in which a short main theme is repeatedly played by altering its playing style or even its melody. In general, the similar parts are repeated for several cycles.

"Almost every variation has a ritardando and a fermata later in the part. You get it now? There's always a 'pause' after a certain fixed distance. No matter how fast Ebisawa Mafuyu speeds the tempo up, the fermata will always disrupt the flow of her playing, and with that, you can get back your own allegro. This piece of music is unique in that sense."

Phew—I heaved a loud sigh. Indeed, everything made sense. I was certain this was the only possible piece—if it was this piece,

then I could actually win.

"And the third reason....." Senpai gave a sinister smile. "This piece is in E \flat major."



I recalled each and every sentence Senpai had said, and walked through the opening theme with heavy steps. At the end of the low-pitched melody I played, was a long pause. Mafuyu's guitar finally made a recovery, and the noise of her electric guitar overwhelmed the pause.

I held my breath as we entered the second overture; a series of simple, yet hesitant, guitar melodies emerged. Goosebumps appeared on my skin in an instant. The ingenious use of syncopation moved and fused just two overlapping tones. However, all music we know is born from that intoxicating feeling one gets when two sounds overlap.

In the third overture, I threw a simple line of melody towards Mafuyu. The high-flying, high-pitched notes of the guitar descended into the low-pitched notes of the bass—it seemed as if Mafuyu's steps had passed right through the torrential waterfalls.

Mafuyu's guitar led the fourth overture and took over the main theme. The whole melody shifted an octave higher, and skipped through the brisk middle octave beneath it. The tempo suddenly hastened, and even though I was thrown about by the huge force, I finally managed to barely grab onto the gaps in-between the phrases of Mafuyu's melody, and pried them wide open with my low notes, which acted as an intermediary between the phrases. I'd be a goner if I were to fall here; there'd be no chance for me to start over. I applied the brakes to restrain Mafuyu.

We finally reached the main theme, but I was barely hanging on by a thread. It was just an ordinary chord accompaniment, but my fingers were trembling nonstop. I desperately tried to use the short pause to get back the original tempo, but Mafuyu never slowed down, despite going into the second variation at a merciless speed—Mafuyu could continuously play triple notes in the time it took me to play a single one.

I took a deep breath before entering the fourth variation. This would be the first crisis.

As my fingers smoothly strummed the sixteen-beat legato, I realized Mafuyu was currently slightly disadvantaged—Mafuyu's simple theme sounded wobbly amid the constant rising and falling of my timbre. She probably thought I wouldn't know how to play that part. I held my breath and focused my attention on the intense passage. I then recalled the words of Kagurazaka-senpai yet again.



"E ♭ major is—"

As she gently caressed the guitar lying on my knee with her fingertips, she said,

"You should know, right? It's one of the most difficult scales to play on the bass and the guitar."

I nodded my head.

Simply put, scales that are easy for guitars are those that don't require the guitarist to press the chords much as they play. However, E ♭—which frequently appears in E ♭ major—is a semitone lower than the lowest note playable by the guitar or the bass. As a result, the guitarist needs to press on the higher ends of the chords while playing, and that's something that's rather difficult to do in terms of finger movements.

"E ♭ major is just as difficult for Ebisawa Mafuyu, especially where she has to play the middle-pitched notes during the high-pitched melody. Even if speed is the greatest weapon in her arsenal, she will definitely be severely weakened by that."

"Urm, no, wait....."

I knocked on my bass once.

"It'll be equally difficult for me to play too, right? Isn't that so?"

The strings of the bass and the strings of the guitar would be tuned to the same tone, so the part would be equally difficult for both parties to play. To counteract this, Senpai had specially shifted the pitch up a semitone in her composition, converting it to E major.

"Young man....." The expression in Senpai's eyes was no longer that of irritation—instead, it had been replaced by pity. "Do you still remember what I said? I said we'll be doing exactly what Paganini did, right?"

"Eh.....?"

I did..... remember something like that.

That was..... something that happened on the day Senpai picked the piece out of a huge stack of CDs and scores. After hearing the sounds of Mafuyu's guitar, Senpai did mention Paganini's name out of the blue.

"..... But, how do you explain that?"

"Paganini's <Violin Concerto No. 1>. You should know that, right?"

I tilted my head and tried recalling the songs I should have heard of before. I then remembered the vast knowledge of Tetsurou—

"..... Ah!"

The bass on my knee fell to the floor with a thud.

Paganini's <Violin Concerto No. 1> — in E ♭ major.

I see, so that's what it was.

"You finally understand?"

"I have to lower it by a semitone when tuning?"

Kagurazaka-senpai laughed and patted my head gently.

E ♭ major is difficult for violinists in the same way it is for guitarists. However, the solo in the concerto played by the Violin of the Devil, Niccolò Paganini, is written in E ♭ major. Therefore, he tuned his violin a semitone lower—

I just..... have to do exactly what he did.

By lowering the strings of the bass by a semitone, I would force Mafuyu to take on the highly difficult E ♭ major, while I played the simplest E major.

"..... That's really despicable....."

I accidentally let that slip out of my mouth.

"How's that despicable?" Kagurazaka-senpai prodded my forehead with the pick. "In order to achieve victory, giving it your all till the final moment before the battle is necessary, no? This is also an act of respect for your enemy."

"Urm, that may be the case....."

"The fourth reason, is that we'll be doing the fugue after the variations." Senpai stated the final reason.

"Ebisawa Mafuyu will definitely not let go of the fugue. Therefore, we just have to let her know that this piece of music is not something that can be played by one person alone. Those are my reasons for choosing this piece, <Eroica Variations>; it practically exists for your triumph over Ebisawa Mafuyu. Therefore—"

Senpai placed her hands on my shoulders and looked straight into my eyes as she said,

"—Resolve yourself, and teach her a good lesson."



After playing through the continuous phrases, I pressed my back hard against the door and swallowed a huge gulp of air. The strings and the neck of the bass had become slippery due to my sweat. The fifth variation finally returned to the simple two voices melody, but that moment of rest was over in an instant. I rushed straight into the sixth variation in C minor without getting a chance to slow down the tempo. That was the only part where the lowering of the bass by a semitone was unable to wield its effects. It was as though Mafuyu had cleaved open the opening phrase with an axe. The screeching melody dragged my body along. My fingers began to spin, and I played quite a few notes wrong. I could almost see Mafuyu's rapidly-firing questions appearing in the places I had planned to stop at—in response, I replied using the same tones that had my stuttering sighs mixed into them.

Even as we entered the beautiful dreamlike canon, Mafuyu hardly showed any mercy. If I were just a beat slower, she would immediately smash my line of melody that was trying to sketch out her footsteps, and begin the next melody by herself.

I could then feel a slight amount of weight pressing against my back. Even though I couldn't see, I somehow knew..... that Mafuyu was leaning her back against the door, just like me. I could almost hear Mafuyu's heartbeats, though that could've very well been the sound of my own heartbeat, or the echoes of the bass.

As the backbeats sustained the melody of the tenth variation—the melody with the dragonflies fluttering all around us—I became more and more confused. Why am I doing such a thing in a place like this?

I had forgotten about the fact that I had been thinking of all sorts of things as I glanced at the scores in an effort to keep up with Mafuyu's guitar. The tips that Senpai had given me had already disappeared completely from my brain.

All that was left were my fingers moving willfully.

Which of the sounds came from my bass, and which of them came from Mafuyu's guitar? I don't know. My modified Aria Pro II and Mafuyu's Stratocaster were like twins shaved out from the same piece of wood—they blended with each other impeccably. I couldn't quite explain the phenomenon by saying they had tuned themselves with each other so as to harmonize perfectly. It was like a mere millimeter of distance between them, a circuit bypass, and a careful balance of high and low tones—a miracle that happened only after the integration of everything mentioned above.

Mafuyu and I were like the left and right hands of one person—

And with that, the final variation came. C minor. It was similar to the vastness of the sea during a night that had just experienced a violent storm.

The thunders were gradually receding, but they were still reverberating deep within the clouds.

The whispers from the depths of the ocean.

Using my right hand, I strummed out a low G that extended endlessly outward.

And then, along with the parting of the clouds, I could finally see the arrival of dawn.

I listened to the rumbling echoes in my stomach intoxicatingly, and loosened my left hand. Then, I gripped the neck of the bass tightly

with my sweaty palms once more.

It was the fugue. I had finally arrived here.

After expelling all of my wishful thoughts that were burning in flames of darkness, what appeared before me was something filled with endless possibilities—the ensemble that shimmered like crystals. I immediately drew out the first note of the beginning phrase. The four simple voices—that had existed since the beginning of the war—rang, while the main melody of the fugue followed the signal and began its flow. After four bars, Mafuyu began chasing the already-running me. Between the two melodies that wouldn't intersect and that would never touch each other, existed what seemed like the melody of a mirage. Who actually played that? Obviously, it was Mafuyu and I. We constantly sent out fragments of the melody, which slowly merged into a crystal clear line of melody—it felt as though there were a third person there playing together with us. I didn't quite know what was happening—all I did was play whatever was written in Senpai's scores. Mafuyu seemed to have analyzed the meaning of the tune in an instant, and kept replying to me. That was the only thing I could come up with. However, was that really something that was possible? Without using words, only transmitting our feelings through music—could this miracle really happen? Or would the miracle disappear the moment I opened my eyes—

..... It gradually disappeared.

I stopped moving my fingers.

Mafuyu's melody, which was supposed to be chasing me, had suddenly disappeared.

The hallucinated warmth of Mafuyu, which I had felt on my back this whole time, had disappeared as well.

I turned around. An *eek* sound came from the other side of the door. It was the faint sound produced by feedback from the guitar.

I had a bad feeling about this.

"..... Mafuyu?"

I tried calling her once. She didn't reply.

Instead, I began hearing the ominous sounds of moaning and

weeping through the gaps of the door.

Chapter 14 - Doctor, Bird Catalogue, Answers

"—Mafuyu?"

I heard no response, despite my loud yelling from outside, so I began knocking on the door. I suddenly heard the sound of something hitting the floor. Another blast of feedback reverberated inside.

I tried opening the door by pressing hard against the handle, but for a moment, I forgot the method of opening the lock, and nearly tore the door down. I finally remembered: I had to press the handle diagonally downwards and to the right before turning it. As the door opened, Mafuyu, who should have been leaning against the door, came crashing down on my body instead. I quickly supported her. Mafuyu's back knocked into my bass, making the amplifiers blare out a tight noise.

Mafuyu's fair skin had turned even paler.

"What's..... wrong?"

My voice was an octave higher due to my nervousness.

"..... I'm fine."

"How do you look fine!? Can you stand?"

"I can't. But..... I'm really okay."

Mafuyu brushed my hand away and tried sitting up. However, her shoulders lost balance immediately, and her right leg was paralyzed. After seeing how her body had twisted into a strange position, I propped up her upper body and leaned her against the wall.

"Why have things turned out like this....." Mafuyu began sobbing. She turned her head away to avoid looking at me, and murmured, "Why? I had already forced myself to forget everything, so why did you make me remember again?"

What's she talking about? I really had no clue.

I removed my bass from my shoulders. The strings seemed to have brushed against something, making a low-pitched tone ring throughout the small classroom. Mafuyu's left hand twitched a little.

"Stop! Stop it! Don't make it play any sound!"

Mafuyu was overcome with a sudden surge of strength—she snatched the bass away from my hands and slammed it forcibly against the ground. One of the bass's knobs fell off the main body. There was a loud horrifying sound, akin to a pair of claws scratching the walls.

Mafuyu collapsed onto the bass and the guitar that were lying on the floor, just like a marionette that had its strings cut. The amplifiers were persistently giving off a disharmonious sound—similar to that of wailing voices—but I had no idea how to stop the sound. Now what? Why have things turned out this way? What should I do? In any case



I should head to the infirmary first. I finally managed to think of that, amid the sharp shrieking sound of the feedback.

"I'll get the school nurse."

"I don't want that—"

Mafuyu moaned. What the hell is that idiot saying at a time like this? I immediately sprinted towards the main building.



Just as I was about to dash into the infirmary, I almost crashed into Miss Kumiko, the school nurse. Miss Kumiko was very young, and the rumor was that she used to be a delinquent, which was quite scary. Actually, the first thing she did was grab my collar, yelling, "Don't run in the corridors!" She then realized something and released her grip.

"You're from the Third Class of First Year, right? The same class as Ebisawa Mafuyu?"

I was still breathless from my run, and couldn't speak as a result. I barely nodded my head in reply.

"Did you see her in the classroom? She has an appointment with the hospital today, but the hospital just called and said she hasn't arrived yet."

She should be going to the hospital today?

Friday. The only day Mafuyu would head home immediately after school. Hospital. I was shocked. As I tried to regulate my breathing, I gasped, "Mafuyu....." "Fainted."

"Where is she?" Miss Kumiko's voice was still calm, but there was a change in the expression of her eyes.

"Courtyard—"

Miss Kumiko quickly grabbed some medication from the rack, then seized my arm and rushed out of the infirmary. When we returned to the courtyard, we saw Chiaki squatting next to the crumbling Mafuyu. Why..... is Chiaki here? Could it be that she was waiting for our showdown to be over?

"Aikawa, please step aside."

"I'll administer some first-aid, then call someone"—I stared blankly at Miss Kumiko's actions, while Chiaki looked at me helplessly.

"What in the world happened?"

I could only shake my head in response to Chiaki's question.

"What in the world did you guys do to make things turn out like this....." Miss Kumiko glared at me as she checked Mafuyu's pulse.

"We..... were just playing the guitar."

"That's all? How can that be? It shouldn't be a problem for her to play a musical instrument."

Miss Kumiko—she knew about Mafuyu's condition?

"In any case, I've asked her father to head over. He said he'd be here soon."

Mafuyu's left shoulder trembled slightly. She slowly leaned towards Chiaki's legs and lifted her face, exposing her pained expression.

"No..... I don't want that."

"What are you talking about? You should be reporting to the hospital today, no? Do you have any intention of treating your illness at all? You can't get careless! Your body's condition is different from an ordinary person's, so we'll have to ask the doctor in charge of you to come down as well....."

Mafuyu shook her head as tears fell from her eyes,

"No. I don't want..... to be seen by 'that person' in my current state."

Miss Kumiko ignored her protests, and turned around to speak to me, "Describe what happened in greater detail. Aihara, please bring the cushions from over there and prop them under Mafuyu."



I saw two men in suits walking in our direction from the parking lot. I had only seen Ebisawa Chisato in photographs, but despite that—and even though I was some considerable distance away—I immediately knew that the one leading was Mafuyu's father.

"What in the world happened?"

The same stupid question—that a certain someone had asked—came from Ebisawa Chisato's mouth as well. His hair was neatly combed and well-greased, although there was a bit of white hair

mixed in. His stern and well-defined contours clearly displayed his anger. Miss Maki came to the courtyard following Miss Kumiko's call. After seeing her arrive, he immediately started to yell.

"To think such a thing has happened, even with you around her! What will you do if something happens to Mafuyu!"

"You can't expect me to be by her side all the time, right?" Miss Maki replied coldly. The middle-aged doctor (he should be a doctor?), who also came along, was standing next to the emotional Ebichiri, telling Miss Kumiko to "carry the lady to the car" with his eyes.

"Why did you not go to the hospital? Who were you sticking around with?"

I turned my eyes away and wondered if I should just run away from that place.

"Guitar? Did you say guitar? Are you joking, who allowed you to play that sort of thing? Mafuyu, what are you trying to do by learning the guitar behind my back? Do you not know how important your fingers are? You may never get to play the piano—"

"Maestro Ebisawa! Please! Don't corner Mafuyu like that!"

Miss Maki pleaded with a pained voice.

"I did not send her to high school so she could play things like that!"

I bit my lip as I listened to the piercing roars of Ebichiri. The doctor and father stuffed Mafuyu into the backseat, as if she were a bagged corpse. There was nothing I could do, other than watch everything in silence.

Just before the door of the car closed, Mafuyu and I exchanged glances. The expression in her eyes was the same as that back then—they couldn't make a single sound, and could only desperately seek something to depend on. Those eyes were like the skies just before a downpour, filled with dark grey clouds. No, I can't let her go like that. I could almost hear a whisper right next to my ears, but I couldn't say a single word, or move a single step.



I wasn't too sure about what happened after that. I was probably brutally scolded by either Miss Maki or Miss Kumiko? Perhaps the reason I couldn't remember much of the details was because neither of them was willing to tell me what happened to Mafuyu. The only thing I remembered was that I didn't say a single word. Chiaki was the one who answered almost all the questions in my stead.

It was already past six when I returned home, and the speakers in the living room were playing Messiaen's <Catalogue d'oiseaux>. Quails, nightingales and even blackbirds—just a single piano was enough to weave out the cries of the various birds. Tetsurou was lying on his side on the sofa, listening to the music while sipping a glass of whiskey.^[1]

"You're back..... What's wrong? You look quite bad, you know? Did something happen?"

I shook my head weakly, and removed the bass from my shoulders and threw it on the carpet. I sank myself into the sofa.

Despite Tetsurou being extremely dense, on some occasions, he would pick up on my feelings without the need for words. At such times, the best course of action would be leaving me alone and making dinner himself—which was exactly what he did.

On the dining table was some sort of burnt meat, as well as salad drenched in dressing. All I had were a few sips of the tasteless miso soup.

"Hey..... Nao....."

"Hmm?"

"You aren't complaining, so perhaps the food I cooked today is actually decent?"

"No, don't you worry, it sucks as usual. I'm full."

Tetsurou was visibly saddened by my tsukkomi, but I left him alone and returned to the living room. I planted myself on the sofa and continued listening to the cries of the birds. I had a sudden urge to cry.

So Mafuyu had been waiting for me.

She should've gone to the hospital today. But because of the things

I said yesterday..... the me who knew nothing and said idiotic things like, "Let's have a showdown on Friday." Because of that, she had been waiting—she was waiting for me.

The song of the birds had ended. Tetsurou removed the apron from his body and sat on the sofa opposite of me. He silently poured some whiskey into his glass. In a situation like this, I would be really grateful if he didn't ask me any questions about what happened.

"Oh right, Tetsurou....."

"Hmm?"

"I think..... it should be a piano concerto..... It's made up of three movements, and the middle movement is a march. Have you heard something like this before?"

I hummed the piece that Mafuyu had played at the junkyard.

"—That should be Ravel's piano concerto....." Tetsurou mumbled halfway into the tune.

A chill ran down my spine.

"..... Which one?"

Maurice Ravel had only written two piano concertos in his entire life. The first was a piano concerto in G major, written for his own playing. The other was—

"The one in D major," Tetsurou replied. That was the answer I had missed.

The other piano concerto, in D major, was written for Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein. Paul lost what was dubbed "a pianist's life"—his right arm—during the First World War. Therefore, the piano concerto that was written for him is also known as—

"<Piano Concerto for the Left Hand>."

Why didn't I notice sooner?

There were lots of signs—Mafuyu never used chopsticks, and didn't copy notes in class. During arts class or physical education, she did nothing at all. There was also that strangely shaped guitar pick, with two rings to slot the index and middle finger through. Even a person with no grip could easily secure the pick between his fingertips.

That was the reason she chose the guitar.

The fingers on Mafuyu's right hand..... they probably could no longer move. It was only now that I finally realized that fact. A certain cruel fate had robbed Mafuyu's piano career away from her, but despite that, she couldn't run away from the music she loved the most. Therefore, she grabbed onto the guitar with all her might, just like a drowning person would to a piece of floating wood.

Why didn't I notice it earlier? Even if no one else had noticed..... I should've found that answer!

Why—

Why did she not tell me anything about it? The dense me knew nothing at all. I had even acted like a kid, insisting on challenging Mafuyu to a guitar showdown. I forced her to stay back, but in the end, had actually harmed her unknowingly.

I really didn't know, because Mafuyu told me nothing at all! I really wanted to find an adult whom I could voice my excuses to, but Tetsurou and the bass case on the floor were both silent. I recalled the <Eroica Variations> that I played together with Mafuyu, and the fugue that was disrupted halfway. What sorts of feelings did Mafuyu experience as she listened to the ensemble that she could no longer play by herself, as she watched on as someone else played the melody in place of her immobile right hand?

Why do we always fail at converting the feelings deep inside us into words?



June arrived a week later. Mafuyu really had disappeared. She no longer came to school.

My classmates were discussing something, something that seemed to have happened on the Friday before the break. They had always ignored what others said, and paid no attention to the moods of others, but just this once, they didn't ask me anything.

"Because Nao looks really depressed....." Chiaki said that to me softly during lunch break.

"Depressed? No?" I wove a lie.

"I even went to ask Miss Maki about it."

Chiaki's appetite was surprisingly low; she didn't take anything from my bento.

"It seems Ebisawa's father wants to go back to America. I think there are specialists there, so it'll be more convenient for them to go for checkups or to schedule an operation..... I'm not too sure about the details, but it seems like Ebisawa will be going as well."

"..... Really."

So that was what she meant by, "I'll be disappearing in June"?

Which meant, Mafuyu would never come back again? So that was why she wanted us to forget everything.....

Because of that—I no longer had a chance to apologize to her, or a chance to smile at her. I could no longer make her angry, or scare her with the image of a zombie anymore; and it was definitely impossible to ask her to help tune my bass.

If I knew, right at the beginning, that she would really disappear—if I knew what she said would turn out to be true—then I would've just forgotten about her, and that would've been it.

According to Chiaki, for some reason, Kagurazaka-senpai hasn't been at school either. Did that person also feel responsible for what happened to Mafuyu? That couldn't be!

"Will she be coming back after her checkups....." Chiaki mumbled. I began to feel that nothing mattered anymore. I was the one who completely misunderstood her, and wrecked everything. I had always thought that Mafuyu would open up to me, but in reality, there existed a wall between us, a wall thicker than the door of the practice classroom—one that no sounds could pass through. I couldn't help but admire how wonderful music was—despite us being so far away from each other, just by playing what was written in the scores, I could imagine that Mafuyu was right next to me. What a wonderful power that is! Disappear from my sight right now.



When I returned home, I took the bass to the recycling center and dumped it there. It seemed like when Mafuyu slammed the bass

against the floor, a connection broke somewhere; it could no longer play any sound. I turned the knobs to the maximum, and even tried dismantling and reassembling them again, but none of that worked. With my skill, it was possible for me to repair it, but honestly, I was not in the mood to do that.

Upon seeing that scene, even Tetsurou didn't crack jokes like, "As expected of my son, you've given up really quickly" or "Just be a virgin for life"; he even prepared me a (extremely disgusting) dinner. I could always say pointless things like this easily, but I couldn't voice the important feelings within me.

After dinner, I sat opposite of Tetsurou who was working on his articles, and hugged my knees. I could hear the speakers play the <Hungarian Dances> softly next to my ears.

"..... Tetsurou, have you heard?"

"Hmm? Ah, mmm."

Tetsurou replied without lifting his gaze from the laptop,

"I heard something from a paparazzi who claims to be the hear-it-all in the music circle. You want to know about it?"

"Is it about..... Mafuyu's right hand?"

"So you do know!"

"..... But I knew nothing!"

I realized everything only after nothing could be salvaged anymore. Tetsurou pushed the laptop to the side. He then looked at me and said, "It was probably last year? Seems like the fingers on her right hand suddenly became immobile just before she was about to start her concert in England. The concert was canceled. They went to quite a few hospitals, but they couldn't find the reason behind it. Back then, there were some who said it might be due to obsessive-compulsive disorder."

I remembered the frightened look in Mafuyu's eyes, and I suddenly thought, could that be related to her father?

"That was the reason she returned to Japan. It was thought that a brief break from piano, and some rehabilitation, could perhaps lead to her recovery. But things don't look that optimistic, do they! Her

condition's getting worse and worse, and she has to go to the doctors for frequent checkups."

I could feel a sense of pain near my heart. So that was what Mafuyu was so desperately trying to hide. She chased away any classmates who tried to get close to her, and was unwilling to approach anyone; she was pretty successful at being someone who was really annoying. Moreover, all those who had tried to get close to her were idiots, so no one had noticed that something was wrong with her right fingers.

Could we really have done nothing about it?

I really hoped someone would tell me, "It's all your fault!" or "It's actually not your fault," straight to my face, without any hesitation. However, upon hearing me say that, Tetsurou coldly replied,

"How the heck would I know? Think about it yourself!"

All I could do was hug my head in desperation.

"..... Tetsurou, what are you thinking of when you tell me these things?"

The question was so damn stupid that even I couldn't stand it. Therefore, after asking that, I didn't dare look at Tetsurou.

"Nothing? I just feel that it's a bit of a shame that I'll no longer be able to hear her play the piano. I really hope she can at least record the **<French Suites>** in its entirety! But to me, she's just one of the many thousands of pianists."

If only I could think as he did—wouldn't it be much easier for me?

"—But that's not the case for you, right?"

I lifted my head to look at him. Tetsurou shot me a glance that said, "Idiot, why else would you ask me that?", then directed his attention back to his article.



After returning to my room on the second floor, I squeezed right into bed without even changing into my pajamas. I closed my eyes, and planned to forget everything, just as Mafuyu had requested.

That should be easily done. I have absolute confidence in my poor

memory, and within months, I'll definitely have forgotten that a person named Mafuyu ever existed. And I won't remember anything that has to do with the bass. I'll return to the life where I kill time by immersing myself in the music of others.

If only I hadn't noticed the sound of someone knocking on my windows two days later.

Notes

1. The piece is translated as <Bird catalogue>

Chapter 15 - Layla, Railroads, Everything that was Lost

At that time, I was in my room, listening to music with my headphones on. I was listening to the album of Derek and the Dominos. It was a Thursday night—the third day Mafuyu had missed school. The wind outside was very strong, and I could hear the branches on the trees, at the side of the walkway, rustling.

Tetsurou had been summoned by the publisher, so there was no one else at home. Typically, I would be free to use the sound systems in the living room at a time like this, but I was too lazy to leave my room. So I continued lying on my bed, listening to the mini sound system that produced sounds lacking depth.

The sounds of Jim Gordon's drums, coming from the speakers, drowned out all other sounds, so at first, I didn't notice the sound. It wasn't until the middle portion of the [song](#), when the melody of the piano began to flow, that I finally realized—someone was knocking on my window.

Naturally, I thought it was Chiaki, as no one else would do something like that. It's already late into the night, what does she want? However, after pulling open the curtains and window, a pair of blue eyes greeted me. I was stunned.

The person opposite of the window, standing on the roof extending outwards, was actually Mafuyu. It was indeed her. Her maroon-colored hair was blown up by the strong winds and was tangled with the guitar case she carried on her back.

"You....."

I wanted to say something, but nothing came out successfully.

"Can I come in?"

Mafuyu said that expressionlessly as she removed the guitar from her shoulder and passed it to me.

"Eh..... Ah, mmm, okay."

My mind was a mess, but I still took the guitar case, leaning it against the wall. Despite my shock, I remember offering Mafuyu a hand and pulling her in after she climbed through the window and removed her shoes. Mafuyu, then, was wearing the same fluttering blue dress that she had worn when we first met..... though it seemed difficult to move about in.

I still couldn't believe it. Was this the continuation of some sort of dream somewhere?

"..... Really?"

As I looked at Mafuyu standing in my room, I couldn't help but ask.

"What?"

"Eh, no, it's just..... a little strange. You shouldn't be able to climb up, right?" And her right hand shouldn't be able to move either.

"My wrists can still move."

Mafuyu answered nonchalantly, moving her wrists about for me to see. Forget about her wrists—even her elbows were filled with scratches. So what she was saying was that her fingers were the only part she couldn't move freely, and that she could still, just barely, climb up here? Even so.....

Mafuyu noticed me staring at her, and thus, turned her head, saying softly,

"I heard Aihara talking about it at school, about how she could climb up the tree and enter and exit your room freely through the window. I somehow felt..... a little envious, so I thought I should try it."

Even so.....

"Why—" are you appearing at a place like this? It was a simple question, aimed straight at the crux of the matter, but I somehow couldn't bring myself to ask it. Perhaps it was because I thought she would disappear the moment I asked it out loud?

In the end, what I said was this,

"How do you know where my house is?" Mafuyu stared at me for a long while before walking to her guitar case. She took out something inside and passed it to me.

"..... John Lennon?" It was a CD—the <Rock 'n' Roll> album I listened to on the roof that day. Mafuyu opened the CD case nimbly with her left hand. There was a piece of folded paper on top of the shining silver disk. Upon opening it, I saw a map. It was so well-drawn, I almost didn't notice it was done by hand. The map accurately listed out the landmarks near my house and described them in detail. What the heck is this.....

"That person' had instructed me to stay at home and not go anywhere." Mafuyu said. That person? She should be referring to her father. "And so, before I went to the hospital, I couldn't leave the house. Just as I was about to head home after the checkup, the CD somehow appeared in my bag without me noticing."

I looked at Mafuyu's face, half in confusion. She tilted her head in response.

"Wasn't it you? Who stalked me to the hospital and placed this....."

"Who would do that sort of stupid....."

I swallowed my words halfway into the sentence. There was someone who would do that sort of stupid thing—someone who would do something in a roundabout manner without hesitation, even if she had no idea whether it would succeed or not, and who wouldn't bat an eyelid wasting half her day and a huge amount of effort.....

"It was Kagurazaka-senpai....."

So that was what she was doing when she skipped school..... Speaking of which, what exactly is she planning? For her to tell Mafuyu the location of my house..... Is there something she wants Mafuyu to do?

"You mean that senpai who has really long hair, eyes like a panther's, and who always says all sorts of strange things?" That was what Mafuyu said. I see, so it's not like Mafuyu has no idea who Kagurazaka-senpai is, huh?

"Mmm..... Should be."

"About that senpai, I've always....." As Mafuyu started to speak, she noticed my gaze and flinched in shock. She turned her head

away and shook it fervently, "No, nothing."

Mafuyu walked to my bed and sat on it, putting me in a situation where I could neither get close to my bed, nor run out of the room—all I could do was lean myself next to the window. Mafuyu's in my room right now—to be honest, I'm still not too sure about what's happening, but—Mafuyu really is here.

"Look..... Urm....." I chose my words carefully. "I don't know..... back then..... Therefore..... I'm sorry."

"You don't know what?"

"No, it's..... the thing..... about your right hand."

"You don't have to apologize to me. I will feel bad if you apologize."

I don't feel that great either!

"Moreover..... you did nothing wrong."

With that, she turned her face away.

"That was not your fault. Those things happen occasionally. The right side of my body gradually becomes immobile all of a sudden, and sometimes, I can't even move my legs. I don't quite understand why either."

For a while, I couldn't speak. The right side of her body gradually becomes immobile?

"Why..... can you say it as though it has nothing to do with you?"

"Because..... it doesn't feel like it has anything to do with me."

Mafuyu lowered her head and showed a slight smile. That was the first time I had seen her smile, but it was such a lonely expression. My heart ached a little.

"And I don't really care if it really can't move. However, that person and the record company may be slightly more troubled by that."

"Ah! Urm..... well..... aren't you going to America? I heard you'll be getting a checkup or an operation there?"

"Mmm. That person will be doing a tour around America, so he'll be taking a flight tomorrow."

"T-Then the reason you came here at this time....."

"Mmm, I ran away."

I let out a loud sigh. She ran away? Then again, this lass seemed to be a repeat offender of running away from home, yeah?

"That's what I had planned anyway. I would run away the night before I was about to be brought to America. It's just my right hand—I don't really care if it cannot be treated. I just want to bring my guitar and run to a place far, far away, until my legs can no longer move....."

Mafuyu closed her eyes tightly, as though she was trying her hardest not to let her tears fall.

"I'll be disappearing in June anyway."

So that was what she meant by that—it wasn't because she would be going to America to seek treatment, but because she had already decided to run away from it.

And then?

I forcibly swallowed that question back down my throat.

She would run to a place far, far away. And then? What would she do after that?

I knew Mafuyu would definitely be unable to answer that question—if the question were directed at me, I wouldn't have the slightest idea on how to answer either. Human beings don't think that far ahead after they've decided to run away from something. They just desperately run, seeking a place to hide—

"..... Why did you look for me?"

"Because....." Mafuyu stared at my fingers, then suddenly lifted her head, "Because you said before, that I should honestly say whatever is troubling me. Do you still remember?"

I did say something like that before. Back then, Mafuyu even asked me to chop off my right hand to give to her; either that, or I turn back time to the period before she had started playing the piano—Ah! So that was what everything was about. Man, I feel like crying even more now.

So Mafuyu had already told me about it! It was just I who didn't realize it earlier.

"So....."

It seemed like Mafuyu was having trouble continuing that sentence. She lowered her head yet again.

"Currently, my hand..... is unable to carry any luggage. Therefore..... together....." Upon saying that, Mafuyu closed her eyes once again, and shook her head fervently.

"Sorry, pretend I never said that."

Mafuyu suddenly stood up and walked towards me. She grabbed her guitar, and just as she was about to take her shoes and climb out the window, I called out to her without hesitation.

"Wait!"

Mafuyu turned around. I was unable to speak yet again. She stared right at me, and the words that I had originally planned to say crumbled inside my mouth. Instead, what I asked was something unrelated and stupid—"Do you want to leave through the main door?"

"There's no one else in the house?"

"Tetsurou's out. May still be a while before he's back."

"I see. But that was my first time climbing trees, and I thought it was quite fun."

Problem was, the expression on Mafuyu's face suggested otherwise. No wait, that's not what I meant!

"..... Alright. Do you have any more luggage? Or did you leave it outside?"

Mafuyu kept staring at my face, and blinked her eyes in confusion.

"..... What?"

"I'm coming along."



Mafuyu's not-too-large backpack was placed beneath the tree in the courtyard. On it hung the recorder that I had helped repair, though I almost forgot about the time I did it.

"Are you really coming along with me?"

"You're the one who wants me to come along!"

"So I do, but..... why?"

I didn't know either. I didn't even know where to go next.

All I knew was that I couldn't allow Mafuyu to leave by herself.

I took the backpack and put it on my shoulders. It was light.

"Right, where's your bass? I only saw an empty case in your room."

Mafuyu suddenly asked that question when we were in the dark courtyard.

"I threw it away."

"..... Why? Ah....."

Mafuyu suddenly let out a shriek.

"I-Is it because of that time? I-I can't quite remember it clearly, but did it break because I slammed it.....?"

"Nah, it wasn't that. Even if it weren't broken, I probably would've thrown it away anyway." That was my reply, and it wasn't a lie either. If I had wanted to, I would've definitely been able to fix it. Moreover, I didn't want Mafuyu to think it was her fault.

"..... Why?" Mafuyu became even more depressed.

Why huh? I sank into my thoughts for a brief moment.

"Because..... I don't like it anymore."

"Don't you like rock?"

That direct question, which lacked any compassion, caused me quite a headache.

"It was quite interesting in the beginning, and it felt great when I practiced. But....."

I shut my mouth. Why did I throw it away in the end? I couldn't quite explain it myself.

"..... Ah, if it is because..... because of me back then....."

I shook my head and interrupted Mafuyu.

"Let's go quickly. Tetsurou may be back anytime soon."

Mafuyu's face was masked by the darkness of the night, and because of that, I was unable to see the expression on her face clearly. But somehow, it just feels like the expression she's wearing right now is one of loneliness, right?

I pushed Mafuyu out the door, carrying her guitar on my back.

"Where are we going?"

"Where do you think we should go?"

Mafuyu and I exchanged such stupid questions.

The two of us began walking at the same time. We passed by the desolate street of the residential area, which was illuminated by only a few street lights, and made our way towards the train station.



Our runaway plan suffered a huge setback—the last train had already left. The small train station stood by itself in the middle of the residential area, with only a convenience store that operated late into the night nearby. There was no one to be seen at the station. As we stood on the surprisingly wide walkway, our only company was our shadows, which spread outward away from us due to the street lights around us.

"What should we do?" I asked in desperation.

"Are we not going to look for a corpse along the railroad?"

That was something I randomly said some time ago, but Mafuyu really turned it against me.

"We're really gonna walk? It'll be really tough!"

And what should I do if your right leg becomes immobile like it did back then?

"I heard that freezing is the most beautiful way to die. Is that true?"

"You can't freeze to death in Japan in June, alright? Moreover, I just realized, something feels out of place....."

"What?"

"Why am I carrying your guitar *and* your bag as well?"

I forgot when the guitar came on my back, but it was really heavy.

"Because you are the one in charge of carrying the luggage!"

"That's not....." No wait, come to think of it, is that right?

I stared at Mafuyu, walking in the direction of the railroad, before catching up to her. The sight of her in her pale-colored dress seemed like it would melt into the darkness and disappear if I weren't careful.

After passing the wired fence, we appeared right beside the dark railroad. As we walked up the gentle slope, out of the blue, Mafuyu asked me about my mother.

"Because your father always talks about the divorce in his critiques."

Damn Tetsurou, he should seriously think about his position as a music critic.

"Do you still remember your mother?" Mafuyu turned her head and asked.

"Of course. I was already in elementary school when they divorced, and we would still meet once a month."

"What sort of person is she?"

"A really serious person, to the point that I fail to understand why she would do something as stupid as marrying Tetsurou. She's very particular about table manners as well."

"I see....." Mafuyu once again shifted her sight back to the railroad before her.

Speaking of which, Mafuyu also lived with her father after her parents separated. So that's her reason for asking me that?

"My Mama....." Mafuyu continued on as she looked forward. Her footsteps seemed to slow down as she walked on absentmindedly. "She left before I even entered elementary school. However, I heard she had remarried a German, and that they were living in Bonn. I even looked up her address last year, as I was passing by Bonn during my Europe tour."

She probably got herself lost? I thought to myself.

"However, Mama refused to see me. Her husband came to the door, and in very polite English, asked me to go back."

Mafuyu stopped in her tracks. She placed her immobile right fingers on the wired fence and leaned her forehead against it. I couldn't see her face, so I had no idea if her shoulders were trembling because she was crying.

"That person said I looked exactly like Mama, so Mama may have refused to see me because she was afraid she might be affected by it. Moreover, Mama's a pianist as well....."

Mafuyu finally turned her head, but showed almost no expression on her face.

"The day after that, we took off for London. There, right before the performance, my fingers suddenly became unable to move. But I..... should not have cared about that at all—"

As she continued on endlessly, she grabbed her right arm tightly with her left fingers.

"Even if the right side of my body becomes unable to move, followed by the left, and finally, my heart stops beating and I die, as long as I am mummified and sent to that person, he will definitely put me right in front of the piano and be pleased with that."

"..... Don't say such uncomfortable things."

Mafuyu ignored my words and resumed walking.

A few of the questions that I had always dared not ask her suddenly appeared in my mind. Since Mafuyu may end up just disappearing, I decided to seek the answers to all my questions.

"Do you hate your father?"

Mafuyu didn't answer immediately. She was two steps in front of me, but she slowed down as she dragged her feet along.

"I have never felt that way."

Mafuyu's voice gently landed on the asphalt, and rolled right next to my feet.

"It's not about me hating him or not..... It's like I'm stuck in a bottomless swamp, helpless and all alone."

"What's with that! Just say you hate him if you really do!"

Mafuyu jumped in shock, and turned her head around after halting

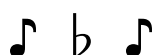
her footsteps. I flinched at my own voice as well, but it wasn't as if I could keep my mouth shut and pretend like nothing had happened.

"..... Why do you speak as though you know everything?"

"Because it's painfully obvious! You don't like your father! Why do you have to make it so complicated? Since my parents divorced, I've said to Tetsurou, multiple times, 'You moronic heartless creature, I hate you the most! Not only have you caused me to lose my mother, my father has died too! Thank god not all of my family members are dead.'"

Mafuyu glared at me with her face flushed red; her hair trembled slightly as well. She then hastily turned away and continued walking forward.

Am I really qualified to say these sorts of things? I couldn't help but think that after Mafuyu shifted her gaze away from my face. After readjusting the strap on the guitar case, which was about to slip off my shoulders, I quickly caught up with Mafuyu again.



After walking a distance of about four train stations, Mafuyu began complaining that her feet hurt. So we walked to a small park next to the railroad and rested on the bench. The park consisted of only a small sand pit, two see-saws and a bench. What a lonely place this is.

"Does your right foot hurt?"

"No, it's both. It has nothing to do with that."

Seemed like the pain was just due to us walking too long. As for me, I was quite thankful for the chance to rest, as the strap of the guitar case was digging itself deep into my shoulder.

I lifted my head to look at the starless gloomy sky, and suddenly, a serious question hit me—what the heck am I doing in a place like this, deep in the middle of the night? What do I plan to do next? I shook my head, stared at my feet and decided to just forget about that question for now.

"My legs always tire easily, and they cramp up frequently."

If so, what's with wanting to search for a corpse along the railway!

"..... Ah, so that's the reason you don't step on the pedals when you play the piano?"

"That has nothing to do with this. In the first place, there is no need to step on the pedals when playing Bach."

"That's not what I meant. I feel you can portray the sustained notes very well even without using the pedals."

"Did you listen to my CD that much?"

"Because people always send them to Tetsurou, I've probably listened to every single album you've released."

"Disgusting."

They're played by you, so what's with the "disgusting"!??

"It would be great if all the pieces that I have played could be burned."

Just don't record them if you don't want to?

"So you don't like the piano, but are forced to play it?"

Mafuyu nodded.

"I have never once viewed playing the piano as something enjoyable."

"But you sounded like you were having fun when you played Chopin's <Butterfly>?"

"Critics always love to guess the feelings of the musicians—I sometimes wonder if they are idiots or something. I can still play a happy piece even if I'm not feeling so!"

Well..... you're not wrong to say that.

Music is but a series of arranged notes. It's up to the listeners to interpret the feelings hidden within.

"So you hate the piano, and don't wish to play it anymore?"

"I can no longer play anyway. I can only move my thumb and my index finger freely."

Mafuyu lifted her right hand and tried opening her fingers. Her middle, ring and little finger were bent weakly.

"If you're to undergo a diagnosis and proceed with an operation....." Perhaps there'd be a chance for you to recover?

"That is why I am running away."

Mafuyu placed her right hand on her chest and covered it with her left, as if she were trying to protect it.

"That person said his dream is to play Beethoven's [<Piano Concerto No. 2>](#). I have always wondered, why No. 2? It is not a popular piece to begin with."

Beethoven had written five piano concertos. Recent research has discovered that Piano Concerto No. 2 in B ♭ major was actually released earlier than No. 1, and it's the least-played piece among his piano concertos.

"I only realized later, after searching through past records, that he had played the other concertos with Mama, and had recorded them as well."

That's—

I shut my opened mouth.

I wanted to say, "That's just you thinking too much into it," but I really couldn't bring myself to say it.

"And..... I don't think my hand can be treated anyway. That's what I think."

Using her left hand, she clutched the wrist of her right hand tightly.

"I was made just to play the piano with that person. Once I give up the piano, it is obvious that I wouldn't be able to move. That's natural."

"Then why are you playing the guitar?"

Mafuyu's shoulder flinched as she looked at the ground.

"And you only play the pieces you've played on the piano before! Do you really hate the piano?"

Mafuyu bit her bottom lip as she searched for an answer. She then closed her eyes and sighed.

"Originally..... Back when I first played [<Hungarian Dance>](#) together with Mama, with our four hands, I felt really happy. I was

only four back then, but we would always place this on the piano and record the pieces we played."

Mafuyu traced out the contours of the sound recorder hanging from her bag with her fingers.

So that really was something left by her mother. And she did say, before, that it was something important.

"But that was only in the beginning. I learned how to play everything later on, but Mama was no longer around, and I was left all alone. All that was left next to me was the piano. After I finished a piece, the score for the next would appear right before me. I had hoped that I could perhaps use the guitar to get that same feeling back, and I was quite immersed in it in the beginning, but....."

She hugged her knees on the bench and rested her forehead on her knees. There was an unmistakable depression in her voice.



"But I became more and more breathless as I played, and yet, it felt painful if I didn't play. I really didn't know what to do. My head was filled with the memories of that person wanting me to play this

and that, so what did I feel when I was playing the piano before all that? I can no longer remember, and perhaps, I have already forgotten it somewhere already. Those memories will never come back to me, because I already lost them a long, long time ago. I can no longer..... get them back."

I unconsciously closed my eyes. All I could hear was the painful voice of Mafuyu.

Can she..... really not get them back? If so, then is there really nothing I can do for Mafuyu?

"..... It's because you've been alone for too long. You won't be able to continue on the path of music like that."

Just then, I remembered an answer from a certain famous mystery novel. If someone were to collapse in a desolate forest, would there be a sound? The answer is no. If it doesn't reach the ears of someone, the sound cannot be considered a sound, but rather, a vibration of air.

"I too, have learned that from Chiaki and Senpai. So....."

I suddenly didn't know what I was supposed to say. What the heck am I talking about? I'm the one who gave up! I knew it would only hurt Mafuyu, but I still tossed it away and planned to ignore everything, didn't I?

"Have you..... really decided to join the band of that senpai?"

"Eh? Ah..... mmm."

Right. The bullshit about snatching back ownership of the practice room and upholding the dignity of rock no longer mattered halfway through. All I wanted was to start a band with Mafuyu. If only I could have been like senpai, and just told her honestly right at the start.....

"I wanted to ask you to join the Folk Music Research Club if I won. The four of us could then practice together as a band in that classroom."

"Forming a band..... I have never thought of something like that."

The expression in Mafuyu's eyes was as if she were trying to send off the migratory birds flying away in late autumn. I couldn't help but avert my gaze.

"Sorry. I was too hot-headed when I forced you to participate in that whatever showdown. It just feels..... like I've caused you to remember those unhappy memories."

"No!" Mafuyu suddenly shouted. "Nothing of the sort. At that time..... I could actually slightly recall those days when I used to happily play the piano. Also, <Eroica Variations> is one my favorite pieces. The sound of your bass was exceptional—it was as if it had fused together with my guitar to form a single instrument. That was the first time I had experienced those sorts of feelings. It was just like magic."

I couldn't help but slump my head. If I buy the same bass and modify it in the same way, would it be able to produce the same sound as back then? Impossible. A mere millimeter of difference, and any slight change in the voltage, would result in miles of differences in the sounds produced. That ensemble could be considered to be in the realm of miracles.

"That really was like magic. Perhaps, that's what playing as a band is all about?"

"Mmm, I had thought about it a little bit back when we were playing <Eroica Variations>. It felt like my right hand had become normal again, and it was as though I had gone back in time, to when I was playing the piano together with Mama. If that is the magic of a band..... then I wish to be part of it too."

"If so.....?" I lifted my head and looked at her.

The tears at the corner of her eyes were reflecting the rays of the street lights.

"But I just can't do it. Things like forming a band with other people....."

"You can't? Why!"

Mafuyu shook her head furiously, as if she were using her forehead to grind her knees.

"I can't. Because I will definitely ruin everything."

"What are you talking—"

"Didn't you throw it away? Because I broke it....."

Mafuyu murmured. I could only swallow back the words that were about to come out of my mouth. I gripped my arms hard.

"I don't quite understand myself..... why I did that back then."

Back then, Mafuyu had taken my bass and slammed it hard against the floor.

"It's that bass's fault for making me recall so many things. I had already erased all those memories inside me! Because..... they're really..... painful....."

Mafuyu barely restrained herself from speaking those words. She gripped her right wrist tightly with her left hand. Perhaps I should cup my ears or something?

At last, she let out a light sigh.

"..... I'm sorry."

There was no need for Mafuyu to apologize. I shook my head.

"I am the one who ruined everything. It's true..... I can't walk on alone by myself."

She hugged her knees and buried her face in them.

"And there is no point in me saying all these. Your bass will no longer come back, and I am already....."

Mafuyu voice was stifled.

I really didn't wish to hear her say such things. Moreover, I didn't follow along just to hear those words from her.

What I can do—

Just one sentence flowed out from my mouth—

"It won't disappear just like that. Let's get it back together."

Mafuyu slowly lifted her head to look at me. Her eyes seemed a little puffy.

"..... What?"

"To get back my bass, that's what—the one I threw away. I'll be able to play it once I repair it."

"B-But....."

Mafuyu sniffled.

"When did you throw it away? It should have been collected by someone, right?"

"The day before yesterday. It was taken away by the garbage truck."

"Do you know where it was taken to?"

"How would I know? That's why we're going to look for it!"

I stood up, but Mafuyu was still hugging her knees, looking at me with that helpless gaze of hers.

We will definitely find it.

Chapter 16 - Lucille, The First Drops of Rain

We waited until dawn before taking the first train. Despite being morning, the sky was still grey, and looked as if it was about to rain.

"Hey, you should be going to school, right?"

Mafuyu asked while we were sitting in the wobbling train.

"Skipping it. Doesn't really matter if it's only a day."

Moreover, I've already skipped plenty of lessons for all sorts of reasons, but I decided not to tell her.

"Did you leave a message for your father?"

"Nope. But I don't think he cares much about me disappearing as long as there's breakfast in the fridge."

"But....."

She herself was a runaway girl, but Mafuyu was surprisingly caring towards others.

"Look, you're the one who asked me to leave with you! Why are you still worried about things like that?"

"..... I thought you did it on a whim yesterday, and that you would return today."

So she was actually looking down on me.

"You're the one who's really running away from home! Your father is probably looking all over for you right now, yeah? Moreover you're a repeat offender....."

Mafuyu shook her head.

"There is a performance tomorrow. That person should probably be heading down to the airport already."

"That can't be, right? We're talking about his daughter disappearing....."

"But for that person, or the band, it will be a much bigger problem

if the conductor is missing, right?"

Well, she's not wrong, but.....

Though it's not like we'd be found out that easily, I guess it'd be much better if we were more careful when passing by the police stations? Mafuyu was someone who had shot advertisements before, so there might've been people who could recognize her at a single glance.

"Where are we going?"

"The district office."

"District office?"



We alighted at the station located in the middle of the city, then walked through the north entrance of the station to make our way towards the office streets. In response to my suggestion, which lacked any serious consideration, the runaway-girl Mafuyu seemed pretty scared.

"What if they realized we're running away from home....."

"It'll be fine if we walk in with our heads held high! They probably wouldn't even consider the possibility of two people running away from home entering the district office just like that, right?"

Then again, it was a little abnormal for me to be carrying luggage and a guitar case, so I made Mafuyu take these two things and hide in the bathroom while I walked into the environmental office by myself.

"Large rubbish? Ah, we do, there's a chart over there."

The fat lady at the counter took her ballpoint pen and tapped the waste classification chart before I finished my sentence.

"Urm..... What I want to ask is, I don't really want to throw it away, but rather, where would I find the things I accidentally threw away?"

The lady tilted her head and looked at me.

"Meaning..... I've thrown something away by mistake....."

"What? You mean you want to find something? Impossible, absolutely impossible." For a brief moment, I had a really strong impulse to just slap her on her head. After hounding the lady for quite a while, I finally got some information about some environmental center. It was a treatment plant where they crushed the large-sized rubbish into smaller pieces.

"But even if you go there..... it's impossible, you definitely won't find it. Do you know just how much rubbish is sent there daily? Do you really think you'll find it after getting there?"

"Thanks, lady."

I quickly ran out of that place. She actually asked me if I thought I would find it after getting there? I think I can, so how about that!?



The environmental center was located on the fringe of the other end of the city. We alighted at a station I had never been to before, and it took us another twenty minutes to arrive at our destination, which was located on a small hill. When we finally saw the sheer size of the building, amid the green forestry, both Mafuyu and I stopped in our tracks unconsciously.

Trucks filled with large trash rumbled past our sides. The two of us could only stand by the side of the road and watch on in amazement as we narrowly avoided being crushed by those trucks.

"It's so huge....."

Mafuyu mumbled, as if to voice my feelings.

Our school could be considered rather spacious, but this place was of another level altogether. The structure we saw was already many times larger than our school, and was constantly giving off loud sounds.

The words of the lady at the environmental office rang in my ears again: *"Impossible, absolutely impossible!"*

"In any case..... let's take a look first?"

"Urm..... mmm."

When we reached the entrance, we were almost run over by an

outgoing truck. Mafuyu was coughing hard due to the dust blown up by the truck. "Environmental Center—Waste Crushing Plant"—that was what was written on the doorpost.

"Where should we go?"

As I was looking around, Mafuyu quietly pointed towards the left. There was a sign that said "Registration Lobby" and an arrow pointing to the left. At some distance, in the direction of the arrow, we could see a small building similar to that of a petrol station.

As we got closer, we could see a large roof extending off the building. Beneath it was a metallic plate about the size of a car, and next to it was a machine that looked like a mailbox. A large "STOP" was painted on the asphalt in white.

"This should be used to measure the weight of the trucks?" Mafuyu said. I see, so they have to weigh themselves upon entering and exiting the place? If so, there should be people at the registration lobby, right?

"Do you think you can find your bass in such a huge junkyard? It might have already been crushed, you know?"

"I won't know..... if we don't check it out."

It sounded like I was trying to console myself.

When we walked to the "STOP" right before the weighing area, the door of the registration lobby suddenly opened. We flinched in shock and stopped in our tracks.

"No no, I said no! Are you guys coming here to throw your junk away? You can't!"

The mister walked towards us aggressively, causing the frightened Mafuyu to hide behind my back.

"We don't accept small-sized rubbish here..... Eh? Hmm?" The mister suddenly walked right up to me, "Isn't this a guitar? You can't throw that guitar away!"

"Eh? You don't take guitars here?"

"We do, but I won't allow it."

..... What?

"Guitar is the soul of man! It'd be sad if the King of Blues, B.B. King, abandoned his signature Lucille guitar, yeah? It'd be even worse if Brian May from Queen abandoned his Red Special!"

What the heck is this person talking about?

"But Jimi Hendrix burned quite a few guitars before, right?"

"That's not throwing it away, is it? He's burning those as offerings to the god of rock! I can forgive that because he's Jimi Hendrix. Eh? You look pretty young, but you've actually heard of Jimi Hendrix before?"

"Eh? Yeah..... I quite like him."

The eyes of the mister sparkled. Seemed like he was a die-hard fan of old school rock.

"Oh, I see! I liked his music best when he was at The Jimi Hendrix Experience, though after the Woodstock Music Festival, he....."

The mister suddenly began to chat excitedly..... Go back to work already! I turned my head back slightly and realized Mafuyu had already run off to the faraway building to escape all this. Damn traitor. That forced me to listen to the mister talk about the Woodstock Music Festival—by myself—for a full twenty minutes.

"..... So do reconsider your decision to throw your guitar away. You should chase your dreams while you're still young!"

I finally had the chance to interrupt, and hastily shook my hands in denial.

"You're misunderstanding things. I'm not here to throw something away, but to get something back."

"Eh?" I began explaining to the confused mister about how I accidentally threw away my bass. The mister suddenly said this, unexpectedly with tears in his eyes,

"..... So..... So that's how it is..... After all, it was the first time you purchased an instrument by yourself..... a youthful memory that you won't soon forget....."

Urm, I never said anything about buying an instrument for the first time, yeah? Though you're not wrong to say that.....

"You finally bought it after saving up your New Year's money for so

long. Even before you could play the bass well, you had already thought up a name for your future band, and a name for your very first album. However, your mother hated rock music, and actually threw your bass away without your approval..... Regardless of the times, rockers will always face the fate of persecution....." Stop cooking up your own story! "And so, you went to the district office, which directed you here. I'm touched by how great you are. Remember to give your bass a lady's name after you've gotten it back!"

"Eh? Can I find it? You know it's been sent here?"

"I don't. Tons of rubbish is sent here daily, so how could I possibly know that!"

Don't be that cold all of a sudden!

"I don't think you can get it back, yeah? I'll tell you first, but I can't allow you to search the compressing facilities; and don't even think about looking in the pit, where everything has already been processed. I can allow you to search the heap before we process it, but you'll be hindering our work."

"I see....."

It felt like the chances were slim. Perhaps I really was too naive?

"Speaking of which, when was your bass collected? Today? Don't tell me it was last week!"

"Urm..... hmm..... It was the day before yesterday."

The mister suddenly opened his eyes wide, "Day before yesterday?"

I nearly thought he was about to transform. I retreated a step back in shock.

"Is it already too late..... if it was the day before yesterday?"

"Was it really the day before yesterday? That's impossible."

"..... Eh?"

"We only collect rubbish on Wednesdays. You didn't take it here by yourself either, did you?"

I shook my head in confusion.

I did indeed take it to the rubbish collection center on Monday night, and I didn't see it on Tuesday.

"Perhaps someone picked it up and took it away?"

"Eh.....?"

If that really was the case, then it was hopeless. I definitely wouldn't be able to find it.

"The television and the other stuff there were gone as well, so perhaps....."

"Eh? Then it must be the other operators!"

The mister crossed his arms and nodded his head as though he had figured everything out. Operators?

"You sometimes see some small trucks going around the city and broadcasting, 'We're collecting large-sized rubbish for free,' yeah? That. We call them weevils. See, all that rubbish—before it's thrown away—is labeled with stickers given out by the district office, yeah? If so, it'd be a crime to take that trash away!"

"Then..... do you know where the operators are?"

"Hmm.....?"

The mister lowered his head and pondered for a while. I guess he wouldn't know that.

We've come to this place already, and yet, it was all for nothing. So the chance of finding my bass really is zero?

I dejectedly nodded my head in thanks towards the mister, and said, "Sorry for disrupting your work." I then started to make my way towards Mafuyu. Just then, a voice suddenly came from behind me.

"Oi! Hold on, rocker. Where's your house?"

Huh?

"If it's within the working areas of the operators I know, I can tell you about it!"

The instant I turned my head, the mister looked just like those muscular chaps like Freddie Mercury. He propped up his thumb and said,

"You want to get your beloved instrument back, right? Then obviously, I can't leave you by yourself!"



As Mafuyu stared at the sky through the train's window, she murmured, "Looks like it's about to rain."

I nodded. I was sitting next to Mafuyu, with the guitar clamped in-between my legs. I took out the list of information about the operators—written by that mister—and double checked it again. Despite him giving me the details of six operators, there was not one that he knew the address of. I guess even someone from the recycling plant wouldn't know that much. The listed operators had names like whatever-transport or something-something-agency or center. What was even more suspicious was that only the name of the person in charge, as well as his cellphone number, was available—they couldn't be a bunch of guys dealing with illegal things, could they?

"Those chaps ain't a good bunch of people, so you better be careful."

He did say that as well. Picking up large-sized rubbish wasn't exactly a serious crime, but you couldn't consider it a legit and honest career either.

"Are you really going to continue looking for it?"

"Mmm. In any case, we'll visit the district office again after lunch, to see if we can get the addresses of the operators from the phone book or their registration information."

"We definitely won't be able to find it....."

"If you're feeling tired, you don't have to follow me around. Do you want to wait for me somewhere and take a rest?"

"I am not following you!" Mafuyu suddenly became angry. "You were the one who said you were coming along with me to help me with my luggage. You didn't forget that, did you?"

"Urm, it's as you say, and so.....?"

"And so, I am coming along as well."

Then stop complaining!

I looked out the window as well. The same scenery of the streets flowed past our eyes, but somehow, it felt different from what we had seen yesterday. Perhaps it was because it was lunch hour now? Would Chiaki be hungry without my bento? Images of school appeared briefly in my mind, but they seemed as though they were from a long, long time ago.

If I am to return to that everyday life, I'm bringing Mafuyu along as well. Therefore, I must definitely find my bass, and retrieve everything that I had abandoned—I must find that sound that binds us together.

Chapter 17 - Bagel Sandwich, Spring, Engineering Firm

After searching through the district office, the library, and the works progress administration office at the cultural center, we only managed to find three operators with addresses similar to that of a company. That wasn't a surprise though, as it seemed like the majority of people in the recycling industry worked alone.

"How should we go about asking them after our call connects? It's illegal for them to collect the junk, isn't it?"

Mafuyu sat on a chair in the works progress administration office, and asked me weakly.

"Hmm..... you're kinda right....."

If they really had removed the large-sized rubbish, they probably wouldn't tell me the truth anyway; and even if they had taken it, it wasn't like I could just barge in and ask for it. In the end, all I could do was walk out the corridor with a brochure and the photocopied details with me. I switched on my cell phone. Whoa! Most of the missed calls were from Chiaki; she had even sent me a message as well. Tetsurou had also called. I could only pretend to not have seen those things for now.

So how should I go about confirming it?

An idea suddenly popped in my head: all I had to do was ask if they had collected a bass; then, wouldn't that narrow down the places I'd have to search? I made up my mind and dialed the very first number.

"..... Mmm, hello..... There's something I'd like to ask..... Right, mmm..... Electric bass."

It was really quite troublesome to ask the same set of questions six times. Moreover, aside from that whatever-agency, the rest of the numbers were all cell phone numbers. I kept hearing the noisy sound of exhaust, the sound of cargo or something rumbling about,

music that was so loud that the sounds were distorted, and the broadcast "This recycling vehicle will collect all electronic trash for free." The people who picked up the phone were probably the truck drivers themselves.

After hanging up, I walked back into the reference room wearily.

"So did you find something?"

"Mmm..... All six said they didn't collect a bass."

"So..... that means there may be other operators that that mister does not know of?"

If so, then there really wasn't a single clue left. It may have been someone pretending to be the official operator, driving everything away first before deciding what to do with the trash. Regardless, we were at a dead end.

The office lady at the cultural center was beginning to be suspicious of us, so we decided to leave the place quickly. The skies were gloomy and filled with thick layers of dark clouds.

I sat on the pedestrian fence and shared a bagel sandwich—which we had bought at a convenience store—with Mafuyu for lunch.

"If only we had some sort of clue....."

I murmured, swallowing a gulp of canned coffee after to wash down the food particles in my mouth.

"Hey, why are you trying so hard to find it?" Mafuyu asked, as she lifted her head to look at me. "Are you that concerned about what I said? Just forget it! We are currently fleeing from home! Just throw away everything and run away! It's not like we can find it anyway."

I kept staring at Mafuyu's guitar case. Though I couldn't quite explain it to her.....

"I'll definitely find it."

"You are just being obstinate!"

And so are you!

"Then how about we make a bet!"

Mafuyu's eyes opened wide when I said that.

"..... What are we betting?"

What are we betting huh? Hmm..... I fell into silence for a brief moment. I actually just said that in the heat of the moment.....

"Well then....." I shifted my gaze to the asphalt and pondered for a while. "If I find it, you have to join the Folk Music Research Club. The winner wasn't decided back then, so you can consider this the play-off."

Holding the sandwich and the oolong tea in her hand, Mafuyu lowered her head and said nothing for a while.

I somehow felt that the person next to me had nodded her head ever so slightly.

"In return....." Mafuyu suddenly raised her head. "If you cannot find it, then you'll have to listen to everything I say."

"Everything..... you say?"

"You'll have to help me with my luggage for life, and..... you will be in charge of collecting money with a hat."

Isn't that how things are already? No wait.....

"What's with me collecting money with a hat?"

"Because we'll have to come up with ways to earn cash! So....."

I really wasn't sure how serious she was about all these things.

"So we'll have to play the guitar by the roadside to earn some cash; then, we will go to one unfamiliar city after another via the train....."

Mafuyu's voice became softer and softer, as if she were dreaming. Even though it was quite pathetic for me to do so, I still let out a laugh. I began to feel that that sort of life wouldn't be too bad after all.

"But won't I need an instrument too?" I interrupted, half in jest.

"But you are really bad at playing. It'd be better for you not to play if we want to earn some cash."

I threw the coffee can into the rubbish bin with all my might. I suck at playing, so sorry about that!

"But you can consider singing? I have never heard you sing before."

"I humbly decline."

Singing huh.....

"..... Ah!"

Mafuyu turned her head around in shock as she heard the strange sound that came from my mouth. She nearly dropped the sandwich she had just taken a bite out of on the floor, as she was holding it with her right hand.

"What? Is there something?"

"A song! I've found a clue."

"Eh?"

Mafuyu tilted her head as she couldn't figure out what I was saying. I took out my cell phone, but hesitated for a while when I saw the image on its LCD display. Am I really gonna do this? I'm currently running away from home, yeah?

The problem was, if I gave up that tiny clue I had, I couldn't come up with anything else. Moreover, I didn't have much time left on my hands. My bass was probably on the verge of being crushed.

I dialed the number of my house.

"..... Tetsurou? Mmm, it's me."

"Oh, it's you! Breakfast was really delicious! So bagel sandwiches still taste nice even after they're chilled!"

"Yeah, mmm....." For a moment, I thought of something: could this fella not have realized I wasn't at home for most of the day, and that I didn't attend school today?

"Oh, what are you doing now? Did something happen? The school and Chiaki both called me earlier trying to look for you, yeah? I didn't see you yesterday when I returned home either. I thought you had run over to Misako's, because you missed the embrace of your mother, so I called her. However, she said it was impossible for you to be looking for her, and had even asked me not to call her anymore—even though she's actually still reluctant to let me go....."

Tetsurou was the same as ever. No, he had gotten even worse.

"Well....." I took a gulp before continuing on, "I ran away from

home."

I could somehow feel Mafuyu's eyes widening as I said that.

"..... So even Nao is running away from me..... No, I sort of realized that yesterday, but I didn't want to believe it....." Tetsurou's voice sounded a little choked up. "Look, I'm sorry. I'll never puke on the doorsteps in my drunken stupor ever again, and I'll clean up my room properly. I'll never sing <Aria> naked after a bath. Let's start over again, alright?"

"Quit saying such disgusting things!" If you want to say those things, say them to Misako! "It's not that. It has nothing to do with Tetsurou. In any case, I don't have much time left to be chatting with you!"

"Eh? Wait, hold on, don't tell me your dying words, Nao! I don't wanna listen, I don't wanna!"

"Shut up! I'll apologize to you as many times as you wish after this, so just answer my question for now. Tetsurou, you should've been at home the day before yesterday, right? Did some trucks collecting large-sized trash for free pass by our house that day?"

What followed was a long silence. I turned around to look at Mafuyu, who was staring at my cell phone uneasily, and made a gesture to signal it was okay.

"..... Large-sized trash?"

"Those trucks that circle round and round while blaring that irritating music."

"Ah—yeah, yes yes yes."

Tetsurou sounded like a patient who had slowly woken up from his dreams.

"Hmm, it probably came during the day? I remember turning up the volume of the sound system by a notch, as the truck was really noisy."

My hand that gripped the cell phone was trembling nonstop.

"So it did come? Then....."

My palm was wet from my sweat, so I switched the phone to the other hand.

"Then, was the truck playing any sort of music?"

This time, there was no hesitation in his answer; he sounded rather certain.

"Oh, yes. Vivaldi."

I sprang from the pedestrian fence.

"Thanks, Tetsurou. This may be the last goodbye, so remember not to drink too much, and eat more vegetables. Take care!"

I immediately hung up after hastily saying that, and switched off my phone.

I then grabbed the luggage off the ground and slung the guitar case on my back once again.

"What's going on?"

"I have a clue now!"

I picked out one of the many leaflets given to me by the mister at the treatment plant. During one of the calls, I had heard something among the background noises—Vivaldi's <The Four Seasons>—**the first movement of <Spring>**. Mutou's Engineering Firm! I was really lucky, as he was the only operator—out of the six—that I had managed to get the address of.



I had actually managed to connect to the thread of the faintest possibility. I began making my way towards the train station, and all I heard was Mafuyu scurrying behind me in her haste to catch up.

Mutou's Engineering Firm was located about two cities away. After taking the train past four stations, we still had to transfer to another train and travel for another three stations before we arrived. It was already four something in the afternoon when we reached the place. Why did they travel so far to my house to collect junk? If not for the guy at the treatment plant, it would've been impossible for me to locate this place.

The city where my house is is not highly populated, nor is it bustling with life; but if I were to slightly exaggerate, this place was totally desolate. Even though it was separated by a river, the plot of empty

space in front of the station—filled with weeds—stood out exceptionally. The noise from the Pachinko parlors further brought out the sad loneliness of the place.

Mafuyu hadn't spoken since a while back.

"Are your legs fine?"

She would definitely nod her head fervently if I asked her that; however, anyone could see that her steps weren't stable at all. I was a little worried, so I tried slowing down my pace as much as possible to match hers. The only problem was that the situation didn't allow us to walk at a leisurely pace.

We stopped at a book and stationery shop in front of the station, and checked the maps to confirm the location of Mutou's Engineering Firm. It was quite a distance away from the station.

It was partially due to Mafuyu not being able to walk too quickly, but we finally arrived at the place after thirty minutes. It was a narrow road that two trucks could barely drive through side-by-side, and on both sides of the road were old houses lined up together in a row. Mutou's Engineering Firm was located in one of those buildings. It was a two-story building that appeared as though it were cut straight out from a black-and-white photo. I didn't even have to see the rusted signboard to know it was an engineering firm. It seemed like the entire first floor was used as a parking area, as well as a working area—a purple colored truck was parked at the side, and the air was filled with the smell of burnt metal. Deeper in, was a heap of things that looked like either tools or junk, but I couldn't quite see it clearly, as it was already getting dark.

"It's this place?"

"Mmm."

The lights were switched on in the tin hut on the second floor, which appeared to be the office; however, there was no one in the working area. I hesitated at the gate for a while. What should I do? Should I directly head to the second floor and spell out everything truthfully? The other party might play dumb in response. Is everything that was picked up really stored inside?

"Wait here for a while, Mafuyu. I'll go take a look."

I placed the luggage next to Mafuyu's feet and walked into the parking area. The smell of metal became heavier. To the side of the truck was a drill and lathe, as well as household appliances such as an old television, fridge, and microwave.

I began searching for traces of my bass in the rubbish heap in the dark—I couldn't find it.

"—Oi!"

A voice suddenly came from behind me, causing me to turn my head in shock. I spotted a burly man who had the sleeves of his T-shirt rolled up to his shoulders. His expression didn't look too friendly.

"What do you want? It's dangerous around here, so don't enter as you please."

"Urm, well....." The guitar case was about to slip off my shoulders, so I slid it back into place. "May I ask..... if you collect any electronics..... and stuff?"

"Yeah I do..... but what do you want me to collect? Not everything's free."

"Ah, no, I'm not asking you to help me to collect something..... I just want to ask if you had collected some large-sized rubbish from my house the day before yesterday? The address is No. 6, Second District, Town K. It was placed together with a television..... it was a bass....."

In the end, I asked the guy about it directly. Even though I couldn't see the guy's face clearly, as he was standing in front of the faintly shining street light, whose rays shone in my eyes, I could still detect a change in his expression.

"Haa?"

I unconsciously retreated a step back.

"Urm..... you see..... I accidentally threw it away as large-sized rubbish by mistake....."

"How the hell would I know! We don't collect things that aren't required of us, and moreover, what reason would we have for running to a place that's two cities away? Think about that!"

That quick denial only further confirmed my doubts. I didn't mention

which city I lived in when I gave him my address. This guy probably knew the surrounding area near my house like the back of his hand, so he immediately knew which city I was talking about after hearing K Town. But there was an even greater possibility.....

It was probably this person who had taken away the rubbish without any prior permission.

"..... But, my family members said they've seen this truck before?" I wove a lie. The man's expression changed, and looked as though the gum he was chewing on had turned into a caterpillar. He stared at me fiercely for quite a while, then spat a mouthful of spit next to my feet.

"So then? What do you want?"

"..... I just want it back."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" The man began to play dumb—seemed like he was set on feigning ignorance to the end. "Bass? We do collect the typical guitars, and sometimes we accidentally picked up a bass or two as well, but we toss them away immediately."

"..... Where do you throw them away?"

"I don't know, I'm not the person in charge here. Now just scram!"

"Please, may I know where you throw them away? Please tell me!"

"Didn't I already say, I don't know! Stop creating trouble for me!"

The man spat yet again, but this time, the spit nearly landed on my shoes. He stomped his foot on the sandy ground, then tramped his way up the stairs to the office. Then, the loud sound of the doors slamming—as if he were trying to break the doors—reached me. I was frozen in place for a while.

I was left alone in the dark space, which was still filled with the smell of metal. A heavy feeling of fatigue suddenly entered my shoulders, and it felt like my muscles had kinked up.

I had already come here—I had actually chased all the way here—

But my clues were dead once again.

I no longer had the strength to even walk.

Sha—I could suddenly hear a footstep. I lifted my head and saw Mafuyu dragging the luggage over. I forced a smile at her. I had said, many times, "I'll definitely find it," but the result was actually something like this—it just felt really embarrassing.

There was nothing I could do. I didn't manage to reach my destination. It somehow felt like I had been repeatedly doing this all this while.

Suddenly, Mafuyu stretched out her not-very-agile index finger and pointed it at the parking area.

"..... Hmm?"

I raised my head and looked in the direction she was pointing.

Half of the purple truck was hidden in the shadows.

"Somehow, it feels like I've seen this vehicle somewhere before."

Mafuyu mumbled.

I stared at her for a while before turning my attention back to the truck.

Just then, a flicker of light flashed in my mind.

I had an impression of it too.

I too, had seen that truck before.

I know this vehicle, so I must've seen it somewhere before. It must've passed by me somewhere. Where was it? Just as I was trying to remember, the side profile of Mafuyu's face appeared in my mind. Why? Why did that strangely-colored truck remind me of Mafuyu? When exactly did I see it? When, where—

"Ah.....!"

I remembered.

I do know this truck—because I had seen it with Mafuyu before.

On that day I first saw Mafuyu, we had brushed by this truck.

At a faraway town next to the seas, in the silent forest within the mountains.

"..... Do you really think this is the truck we saw back then?"

Mafuyu didn't answer me, but I wasn't waiting for her answer

either. We had no other options, as this was the only clue left.

Mafuyu and I looked at each other and nodded at the same time.

If so—then let's get moving.

We walked out of the engineering firm and traced our steps back to the train station.

Towards <The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>.

Chapter 18 - The Department Store at the Ends of the World

The slow, wobbly train we took to the beach was the last train of the day, which meant we wouldn't be able to return home that night. As we walked along the wrinkled roads, which appeared similar to the skin of old people, a gush of wind breezed past us; it carried the smell of the sea and the rain. We hadn't noticed, but the sky had already turned dark; however, it was still filled with gloomy clouds. It looked as if a gentle prod with the fingers could cause the layers of clouds to break, flooding the lands with rain.

After passing by the residential district, we came to a small trail that led uphill. Mafuyu was already breathless from all the walking; she had to stop around every ten meters to take a short rest, bending her back slightly and resting her palms on her knees.

"That's why I said you don't need to force yourself to come with me."

"Idiot."

I had no idea if it was because she was gasping for air, but Mafuyu's reply was extremely short. Speaking of which, you should've worn clothes that's easier to move around in if you're running away from home, yeah? The last time I saw you, you were wearing the same fluffy dress.

What should I do? I can't possibly leave her here by herself, right? "Do you want me to carry you piggyback?" If I dump the guitar and the luggage, I should be able to do so, right? Though walking uphill would be really tough.

"I would never do something as embarrassing as that. I'm fine."

Mafuyu's shoulders were heaving up and down, but she still forcibly answered me.

"You won't collapse like you did last time, right?"

"I said I'm fine!"

Good.

However, I still helped support Mafuyu until we reached the fringe of the forest.

The guitar was hanging on my right shoulder, the luggage on my left, and Mafuyu's right arm was slung over my neck. With all that weight pressing down on me, I couldn't even straighten my back. Yet, I felt like I was on a high, and that feeling surpassed all the fatigue I was supposed to be experiencing. What the hell is wrong with me?

"Isn't it heavy for you?"

The stubborn Mafuyu was leaning half of her body weight on me, walking mostly on a single leg. She asked me that worriedly, but I never replied. Instead, I sung <Hey Jude> from The Beatles. *And any time you feel the pain, hey, Jude, refrain; Don't carry the world upon your shoulders*—those were the lyrics of the song.

I could hear the laughter of Mafuyu next to my ears.

"You are better off singing. It's much better than your bass."

Shut up! You don't have to care.

The weight of the luggage wasn't too bad—the biggest problem we faced was poor vision at night. There was no proper road in the forest, and even though the trucks had sort of rolled one out, it was still filled with roots, which were easy to trip over. Before boarding the train, we had bought a torchlight from the convenience store; it served as our only source of light.

Mafuyu and I had nearly tripped a few times, but the other person would always support the falling person with all his might. If the two of us had really fallen down, we probably would not have gotten back on our feet anytime soon.

The sounds of the waves of the nearby sea had infiltrated the dark forest, and sounded like the quiet sobs of a few thousand people. The night was especially dark, due to the cloudy skies, so we weren't able to see the roots on the ground properly. Even if the end of the forest—which led to the mouth of the ocean—was just a few meters away from us, we probably wouldn't have realized it and would've walked on anyway, only to fall to our demise. We were

fumbling through the darkness for nearly the whole route, and could faintly hear the rumbling sounds of thunder from faraway.

Even so, when we reached our destination, the two of us halted our footsteps and lifted our gaze off the ground at the same time.

Even amid the dark night, we could feel that the forest had come to an end.

"This place is indeed something special," I thought to myself. The outline of the layers of junk seemed to give off a faint glow of light.

<The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>.

The place that had gathered many torn and tattered wishes.

The place was surrounded by silence, as though it had been shifted to an alternate dimension. However, the place would occasionally be shaken by lightning—which would light up the whole place in a flash—followed by the sounds of thunder.

When we saw the entrance of the junkyard, we leaned against each other and just stood there for a long time.

It was too big. I had to dig out a tiny instrument from this mountain made up of tons of rubbish heaped up together—it suddenly felt like I wouldn't be able to find it even if I spent my whole summer looking.

"..... Are you really going to find it?"

Mafuyu asked softly. I nodded my head silently, and removed Mafuyu's arm from my neck before making my way to the mountain of junk alone. Since I was planning to find it, and was already here, there was no point in me being dejected forever. It wouldn't do if I didn't start searching.

If it was thrown away here the day before yesterday, the bass should be somewhere close to the entrance. I flashed the torchlight at the foot of the mountain and began scanning the gaps in-between the junk, which consisted of derelict bicycles, vending machines, Pachinko machines, grandfather clocks and more.

I inadvertently turned my head around and saw Mafuyu sitting on the luggage, gazing at the mountain of junk with a tired expression.

I'll just let her rest. As it was something I had lost, I had to be the one to find it.



How long did it take me to walk around the foot of the mountain once? I really didn't know. When I returned to Mafuyu's side, I was so tired I could barely keep my eyes open. The light from the torchlight was much weaker than before, and my hands were covered with filth.

"Finding it is impossible....."

I heard Mafuyu's voice, so I switched off the torchlight and sat down next to her.

"I've only..... walked around it..... once."

My throat was parched, so I could barely make a sound.

"And it looks like it's about to rain! Even if it really is here, you will not be able to repair it if it is drenched by the rain."

"That's why I have to find it as quickly as possible!"

"Why? I don't get it. Why are you so persistent about it? I-Is it because I said I like the tone it produces? But..... those words....."

"Because it's a really special bass."

I replied with a hoarse voice.

"Even though it's neither expensive nor rare, I changed its pickups, modified its wiring, shaved it with a file, and even installed a tuning circuit—all so that the bass could match the tone of your guitar. The tone of that bass was created by me, so it's a unique bass."

I could almost hear Mafuyu holding her breath.

The promise between Senpai and I was in that bass as well.

I would not have thrown it away if that bass was not important to me.

"Moreover..... we haven't looked inside yet."

A drop of rain fell on my face as I stood up.

It was raining. I had to hasten my pace.

I stepped on the roof of the derelict car and began scaling the slopes with a *krakaka* sound coming from my feet. If it took me that much time to look through just the foot of the mountain, how

long would I need to comb through the whole mountain? Moreover, it wasn't like I was guaranteed to find it; I didn't have any definitive proof it was thrown away here.

Even so—

It wouldn't do for me to just let myself be drenched by the rain either.

Giii— the sound of metal rubbing came from behind me. I turned my head around. On the trail I had walked on was a white silhouette, which seemed to almost be blown away by the wind.

Mafuyu had followed me.

"What are you doing!?"

As I had reached the crater of the mountain first, I stretched out my hand and grabbed Mafuyu by her wrist, pulling her to my side. Mafuyu had nearly fallen down the mountain, due to her unstable footsteps and her weak right hand. After much difficulty, she finally got on the slanted industrial-use refrigerator and said, while panting,

"I'm going to help you find it."

"You don't have to, and we only have a single torchlight anyway....."

"I want to help!"

I heaved a sigh and directed my attention back to the center of the mountain of junk. As I looked at the giant swamp of darkness before me, I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed with a sense of helplessness. I actually had to look for my bass in this nightmare of junk, this huge piece of land before me that I could never wake up from.

I shone the weak, untrustworthy rays of the torchlight towards the valley and suddenly saw something reflect. I stared at the thing carefully, with the torchlight still shining at it—it wasn't the sharp reflection of metal, but rather, a much softer reflective surface. Mafuyu realized what it was before I did.

"..... It's still there!"

Her voice was as disoriented as her breathing.

Mafuyu made her way down the basin. She first stepped on the

edge of a protruding cupboard, then grabbed onto a half-buried metal desk with her left hand, moving downwards slowly and carefully. I followed Mafuyu hastily, while remembering to use the torchlight to illuminate the path for her.

The grand piano located at the basin was more slanted than when I first saw it. The cover was already torn off and had slid to the side. How many storms had it been through already? I shone my torchlight at the interior; the still orderly strings were surrounded by filth and decaying leaves.

I lifted the key lid and gently pressed the keys.

A surprisingly clear sound stirred up waves of ripples in the swamp of darkness. But that was all there was to it—the echoes disappeared in an instant. So the resonance back then was really just my auditory hallucination—or not?

"Why can it still make sound despite being in such a dilapidated state....."

Mafuyu said next to me, with a voice close to crying.

Probably because we were at <The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>? Because this was a special place that fulfilled the true wishes of people who had come from faraway places.

Mafuyu stood before the keyboard and began playing every single key, starting from the lowest A. It started off as a series of slow and sturdy steps, then gradually changed into light springy hops, before finally streaking past like a flash of lightning—the five fingers of her left hand climbed all the way up to the highest C.

She didn't miss a single note, and every note was clear and penetrating.

The lingering sounds of the piano shrouded us like mist beneath the moonlight.

"Why..... We easily found something I no longer want, but why can't we find the thing that you are looking for?"

Mafuyu mumbled with her head slumped low, as she held onto the edges of the piano. Was that a raindrop that fell on the keyboard, or was it something else? I really didn't know. It just felt like the junk beneath my feet was noisily responding to the brief sounds of the

piano, the piano that, for an instant, had broken the silence.

That feeling—it was just like the tuning of the orchestra prior to the start of a performance. The oboes would begin by playing an A, and the violinist concertmaster would follow with the same note. The rest of the orchestra would then begin to tune themselves to the pitch of that tone.

So—they'll only respond to Mafuyu?

Just then—

I suddenly remembered something.

If this was really a special place—

And if it could really fulfill my heartfelt desire—

"Mafuyu....."

I spoke with a tight voice. Mafuyu raised her head to look at me.

"Can you play the piano for me?"

"..... Eh?"

"Just play something, anything. Ah, no, try playing songs that require you to use the white keys more. Can you please..... do that for me?"

Mafuyu was dumbfounded. She stared at her right hand for a while, before lifting her head to look at me again.

"But I....."

"It's fine if you just play with your left hand."

Because it had to be Mafuyu who was playing.

"Why.....?"

"If Mafuyu's the one playing, I think it'll probably respond to your calls."

Mafuyu slowly shifted her gaze from my face to the keyboard of the piano.

It was something she had already abandoned.

I didn't wait for Mafuyu's reply, and once again, scaled the slope formed by layers of rubbish. Opposite of the basin just so happened to be the highest point of the mountain of junk—a peak consisting of

a heap of cars.

Right when I reached the highest point of the mountain—

The sounds of the piano came flowing from beneath me.

The five separating chords disappeared into the darkness, and began spreading outwards bit by bit as they began to change form, just like a flock of birds riding on a gust of wind.

Book 1 of <The Well-Tempered Clavier>—**Prelude and Fugue No. 1 in C major.**

That was the very first article in the piano scriptures left by Bach.

The prelude was like a fragile crystal, created by stacking layers and layers of tones together.

When she played the final chord, the crystal shattered instantly—the bright sparkling shards scattered all over the mountain of junk. Every single piece of junk seemed to be awakened by Mafuyu; they were all raring and ready to sing.

I sat on the engine cover of the derelict car, then closed my eyes and listened carefully.

Mafuyu's fingers weaved out parts of the main melody of the fugue. A second voice, followed by a third, soon joined in the lonely song of prayer at dawn. Under the lead of the piano, the junk buried within the valley began to resonate—the rich sounds of the string instruments; the flutes and trumpets; the crisp rings of the tambourines.

The fourth fugue flowed next.

But how? Mafuyu's right fingers shouldn't be able to move. I turned my head around in disbelief, but all I could see was a bottomless pit of darkness. The sounds created by the piano were like waves clashing against each other, but I had no idea where they came from. Could she be playing the four voices with just her left hand, using some technique I didn't know? Or did I just fill in the missing parts with my memory and auditory hallucinations?

I didn't know. All I could do was continue searching for my bass, before Mafuyu's magic disappeared.

I dove into the sounds that filled the atmosphere and held my

breath as I went deeper and deeper. I pried apart the arguing viola and cello and continued diving deeper into the sea of the low-pitched sounds. I plunged both my hands into the ocean bed to search for a single sound resonating with Mafuyu's piano—that obscure and tiny sound.

I found it.

That location was pulsating each and every time Mafuyu's fugue slid down the slope of the low-pitched notes.

It was where the heart was located.

I opened my eyes wide. Despite being surrounded by darkness, I could see that place clearly. I slid down the slope of derelict cars and crawled along the ridge of the mountain of junk. Finally, I could feel the pulse on my palms, the pulse supporting the faraway footsteps of the fugue. It was located along the inner slopes of the mountainside.

Right between the oil barrel with a hole in its side and a small car without wheels, I found it.

I stretched my hands into the space between the two pieces of junk and gripped the neck of the bass. I could feel the strings vibrating in resonance with each and every note Mafuyu was playing. That was definitely not my auditory hallucination, as my bass was really trembling to the sound of the piano.

I found it. I finally found it.

I pulled my bass out from the junk. The grey body of the bass was covered with scratches, and the four strings were still vibrating slightly in response to the sound of Mafuyu's piano. I could clearly see traces of the damage that the bass sustained when Mafuyu slammed it against the ground that day.

I suddenly remembered the words of the mister at the rubbish treatment plant: *"Remember to give your bass a lady's name after you've gotten it back."* But that was impossible—I only realized it after regaining what I had lost. I looked at the bass in my hands breathlessly—

It was like a small part of me that I had lost, so there was no need for me to come up with any other name for it.



"..... You really found it?"

Mafuyu stared at the Aria Pro II in my hands in disbelief. She was waiting for me next to the piano this whole time.

"I said I'd definitely find it."

My voice was still shaking when I replied to her, as I was still unable to believe it myself.

Mafuyu took the bass from my hands. She stared at the long scratch on the body for quite a while, before caressing it gently with her fingers.

"I'm sorry..... It must have hurt, right?"

"Urm, you don't have to apologize....."

"Ah! It's not like I'm apologizing to you!"

Mafuyu turned away from me while hugging the bass in her chest.

"..... Thank god."

The magic seemed to have dispelled the instant Mafuyu mumbled that. A loud crash of thunder came rumbling, and huge drops of rain began to fall on the junk, making *pita pita* sounds.

"It's raining. Let's go inside! Where's the luggage?"

"Eh? Inside.....?"

"Ah, we placed it at the forest there, right? I'll bring it here, or else your guitar will get wet as well. Go inside and wait for me."

"Where is inside.....?"

I pulled open the door of a car located on the slope, then grabbed Mafuyu by the arm and shoved her inside.



"I totally did not notice that there was such a big car buried here."

Mafuyu said that as she sat in the co-driver's seat. "I found it during my second time here." My hair was still dripping wet when I answered her. As the interior of the car was surprisingly clean—to

the point that no one would realize it was the inside of a derelict car—I would occasionally come in here to rest.

Mafuyu slowly stretched her body to the back of the car, then returned to her seat holding a towel.

When I was running back to the car after grabbing the luggage at the entrance of the valley of junk, the sky suddenly began to rain heavily, as though its bottom had been removed. To prevent Mafuyu's guitar from getting wet, I sheltered it beneath my body, resulting in me becoming drenched instead. I gratefully took the towel from Mafuyu and dried my hair with it. A surge of overwhelming sleepiness assaulted me when I leaned my back against the seat, but I forced myself to sit up straight by grabbing onto the steering wheel.

"..... Just sleep if you are feeling sleepy."

Mafuyu murmured beside me.

"Eh? Ah..... I'm not..... mmm."

"I'm this tired even though I didn't do much, so you should be worse off than me, right?"

"..... I never thought you could be that considerate towards others."

"I am really worried about you! Idiot!"

The towel was snatched away from me. Mafuyu forcibly turned her body away and curled it against the co-driver's seat.

The rain was getting heavier and heavier. Being in the car—that had more than half its body buried in the junk—the echoes of the rain sounded really intriguing, just like the static noise of a television.

What time is it now? I didn't even have the strength to take my cell phone out to check the time.

I was so tired it felt like the bones in my body would shatter at any moment.

However, before I succumbed to sleep, there was something I had to ask Mafuyu, no matter what—it was about the piano I had heard earlier, the fugue right after the prelude.

That sound..... Let's cast aside the prelude for a moment—it's

impossible for the fugue to be played by a single hand. Could it be..... that Mafuyu's right hand could move at a time like that?

Mafuyu's shoulders were rising and falling rhythmically. I could even hear slight breaths coming from her. In the end, I swallowed my question.

The only thing I was certain of, was that my bass was currently lying on the backseat of the car, together with Mafuyu's guitar. That was the only thing that wasn't imaginary, because I had definitely gotten it back.

If so, then nothing else mattered anymore.

I shut my eyes and allowed the sounds of the rain to continue roaring around me.

It wasn't long before I sank into sleep.

Chapter 19 - The Song of Blackbird

I was awoken by the blinding rays shining in my eyes.

Despite wanting to wake up, my whole body was sore. From my neck to my spine, and my waist to my flank—every part was aching. I forcibly swallowed the moan that was about to slip out of my mouth.

I opened my eyes. The light of the morning sun shone in the car from the window on my right. As I endured the pain all over my body, I cringed and looked at the co-driver's seat—Mafuyu was still sleeping soundly as she faced me. Her long maroon hair had spread out messily on the tilted seat. She looked much better compared to yesterday.

I twisted my body around in the cramped driver's seat, stretched my shoulders, and turned my stiff neck. After finishing some brief stretching exercises, I could finally move a little. I gently opened the door and headed outside.

The rain from last night had already stopped, and a thick layer of mist surrounded us. I thought the sunlight was quite intense when I first woke up, but in reality, the sky was barely turning white—it was still rather dark. I took my cell phone out of my pocket to confirm the time. It was only five in the morning.

Still, I didn't have any desire to go back to the car to sleep more.

I had slept last night without thinking too much about things, as I was too tired; but looking back, Mafuyu was sleeping right next to me, and the car was an enclosed space as well—how could I possibly go back to sleep!

I then realized I had to check whether my bass could still be salvaged. I gently opened the backdoor, trying my best not to make a sound.

As I reached for my bass, I suddenly remembered I didn't bring

any of my tools with me. I'm a real moron. I didn't notice for a while because I used to carry them by my side all the time. What to do? I won't be able to get the application form inside the bass—did it get wet?

As I was considering looking for a screwdriver in the rubbish heap, I suddenly noticed Mafuyu's guitar lying next to my bass. I had long thought it was a pretty impressive guitar, and had always wanted to touch it. If possible, I hoped to play it at least once.

Since Mafuyu was still sleeping soundly and breathing steadily, I succumbed to my desires pretty quickly. I tossed my bass aside and carried the guitar case out of the car. I tried to close the door as quietly as possible. The car was buried in such a way that it was slightly tilted towards the co-driver's seat, so it was rather difficult to close the door without making any sounds.

I climbed the slope and sat on the horizontally-lying washing machine located higher up. The slightly-damp morning air felt really comfortable.

I opened the guitar case. What lay before my eyes was a Fender Stratocaster, with its beautiful grains and coat of transparent lacquer. This is an old guitar from the sixties, right? It probably cost somewhere around three million yen on the market? Brimming with anticipation, I tried strumming the guitar with my trembling fingers. The rich tone that came out didn't sound like that of an electric guitar.

I sat myself properly on the washing machine and began playing the melody using the three fingers technique, tapping the tempo of the song with my fingertips at the same time. At a place where I could hear the real cries of the birds, I began to softly sing the lyrics, as I became shrouded by the mist. The air of the early morning absorbed my entire singing voice. When I reached the second verse, I decided to raise the volume so my song could reach the birds that might be listening to me singing.....

"..... What song is that?"

The voice of a person suddenly rang, causing me to nearly slide off the washing machine in shock. Mafuyu was standing right beneath me, and she was looking in my direction while rubbing her droopy

eyes.

"Urm, well....."

Mafuyu made her way through the junk and sat down right next to me. There wasn't much space on the washing machine, so I could clearly feel the warmth of Mafuyu.

"Sorry for playing it without your permission."

"It's fine. What's the name of that song?"

I felt embarrassed all of a sudden, so I stared at my hand holding the neck of the guitar.

"It's a song called **<Blackbird>**."

"It's a good song."

I was shocked, and lifted my head to look at Mafuyu's face. Mafuyu was tilting her head and looking at me as though she was saying "What's wrong with you?" I quickly shifted my eyes back to the guitar.

"What sort of song is it?"

I had no intention of spouting nonsense this time round.

"..... How much do you know about The Beatles?"

"Not too much," Mafuyu shook her head.

"I see..... alright." I thought for a while. How should I go about telling her this story? "The members of The Beatles were on extremely bad terms with each other when they were recording this song, and were almost at the point of breaking up. And thus, it seemed like the songs in the album were all pieced together only after the members were done recording their voices individually."

And yet, that album is still a classic. Just as Mafuyu had said, regardless of how the critics go about with their baseless accusations, musicians can still come up with their finest works under the worst circumstances.

"It's said that Paul McCartney had recorded almost everything by himself; John Lennon was busy doing the sound collage for **<Revolution 9>**."

While John Lennon was working on the song of revolution—that he

was unable to convey to anyone—Paul McCartney had quietly finished the song dedicated to the blackbirds.

"..... So all this song needs is a guitar to play."

"Mmm, even though it is simple enough that even you can play it, the accompaniment is still very nice to listen to."

I was pissed for a moment, and a wicked idea came to my mind. I decided to try provoking her.

"But you can't do it. You can't play this if your right ring finger is immobile, as the song requires the use of the three fingers technique. Serves you right! If you feel bitter about that, then go to America to get your hand treated before you scramble back here!"

Mafuyu looked at me unhappily. She then snatched the guitar and began playing <Blackbird>—with only the thumb and index finger of her right hand.

She should've skipped some of the notes, right? But still, all I could hear was a playing that could not have been more perfect. Moreover, this should be the first time she has heard the song, no?

After she was done with the first verse, Mafuyu pouted and placed the guitar back on my knees.

"..... Can you not do things that'll make untalented people feel inferior?"

"If it's just something of this level, anyone can play it if they practice hard enough."

My ass!

Mafuyu got off the washing machine and went to the car. She opened the door to grab my bass, then returned back next to me..... She placed the bass on her knees and quickly tuned the instrument, before playing the G notes with a tempo that urged me to follow.

I immediately began playing from the beginning, coordinating myself to the sound of her bass. Slow down the tempo and follow through with my singing until the end.....

The blackbird began to learn how to fly with its torn and tattered wings, as though it had been waiting for this exact moment for all its

life, the moment for it to take flight.

"This sounds just like a normal bass if it's not connected to the amplifiers..... How intriguing....."

Mafuyu mumbled to herself when we were done with the entire song.

"But there will still be some changes to the tone if we plug it into the amplifiers, so I'll still have to adjust it. Moreover, the body of the bass is filled with scars and pits from the bumps it received."

Mafuyu looked at me rather uneasily.

"You should..... be able to restore it, right?"

I nodded my head and began to play the prelude of <Blackbird> yet again. Even if our wings are torn and tattered, we just have to wait for the right time for us to take flight.

"Is this..... a song that was written to give someone strength?"

Mafuyu suddenly asked that. I hesitated for a moment before answering her.

"It's said that the song was written for the liberation of black women, and I think Paul McCartney himself said something like that before. However, I don't quite like to think of it as that."

"Why?"

"Because that's just too awkward! Why do we have to think so much about it? Just treating it as a song about a blackbird will do."

"So there really is such a type of bird?"

"Mmm. Its binomial name is *turdus merula*. It's a small bird full of black feathers, and only its beak is yellow. I've heard that its cries are exceptionally clear and bright. I've seen it in photos before, but there are probably none in Japan."^[1]

Just then, Mafuyu smiled slightly. That was the first time I had seen her real smile.



"..... But there are. I've seen them before."

I tilted my head.

"Where?"

Mafuyu narrowed her eyes, then prodded my chest with her index finger.

"Right here."

The mist was gradually dispersing, and the cries of the birds became clearer and clearer. The light of the morning shone through the woods, and Mafuyu and the dumbfounded me cast a long shadow, one that stretched all the way to the piano in the middle of the basin.



We spoke not a single word as we made our way back to the train station. My left shoulder carried the backpack while my right hand carried my bass, which was wrapped up in a towel, so Mafuyu had no choice but to carry her own guitar. Our footsteps were both really stable, unlike those of yesterday, when we were stumbling about. The weather was incredibly clear as well, and it made me feel as though I could walk to the ends of the world.

However, both Mafuyu and I didn't ask each other where we were planning to go to next; instead, we walked side by side down the streets of the small town, which had already become dry due to the rays of the morning sun. Perhaps it was because the two of us had some sort of premonition about it?

"Are your legs fine?"

"Mmm, they're alright now."

"Really? It won't turn into a situation where half of your body can't move or something?"

"Probably not. The doctors told me nothing, but I've always felt like the right half of my body disappears when I sleep. Either that, or it slowly sinks into the waters with a gurgling sound. It feels really scary. Therefore, I always sleep with the left half of my body facing down."

That should just be Mafuyu's hallucination or something? Speaking of which.....

"But you were sleeping with the right side of your body downwards last night?"

Mafuyu looked at me in shock.

"It's true. You were sleeping facing me."

"You're lying?"

"It's true!"

"You liar!"

Why would I lie about things like that!

"To be honest, I've always felt like the right half of my body was buried in a hole, and soon, I wouldn't be able to move my wrist either. If that becomes the case, I won't be able to play the guitar anymore."

I glanced at Mafuyu's right hand as it hung by her side.

"But your left hand can still move? If so....."

I took a look at my right hand.

"If so?" Mafuyu asked. I continued staring at my hand.

"Why don't you learn how to play the guitar with your teeth, like Jimi Hendrix?"

"Idiot!"

Mafuyu lifted her guitar case and swung it at me.

"Why can't you say things like 'Then let me be your right hand instead,' or something along that line?"

"No wait! But..... it's *my* right hand, yeah? I can say that, but I suck at playing the guitar and the piano! I'd ruin your sublime techniques!" I explained as I ran away from her.

"It's the thought that counts! Geez!"

After chasing me for quite a while, Mafuyu suddenly walked away from me in quick steps. I chased after her and hesitated for a moment before saying,

"Oh right, Mafuyu....."

"What?" She snapped, without even turning her head around.

"Do you still remember our bet, about whether I'd find my bass or not?"

"..... Mmm."

"If so....." I pondered for a moment. How should I phrase my words? If I say something like, "Your hand is no longer your personal problem, but a problem of the whole band," Mafuyu would definitely get angry.

"I can still play the guitar for now, so it's fine."

"But after that....."

"I will use my teeth to play. Fine?"

Whoa, she actually retorted like that. Seemed like she was really pissed.

I maintained a distance of three meters while walking behind Mafuyu, and pondered on how I should put it into words.

"I understand, we'll just leave things regarding the band as they are for now, but....."

I guess I'll just tell her truthfully.

"I wish to hear Mafuyu play the piano once more."

Mafuyu didn't stop in her steps or turn around to look at me. She didn't answer me for a long time. However, she did slow down, and finally started walking by my side. Somehow, it felt like she had nodded her head slightly.

In the end, I still missed my chance to say what I wanted to say—to ask her to seek the expertise of a specialist to treat her hand.

However, that was something that only Mafuyu could decide for herself. All I could do was run away from home with her, and perhaps lend her my shoulder once in a while.



The first person to spot us was a young policeman cycling on the road opposite of us. He quickly stopped his bicycle about ten meters away from us, and nearly slipped into the ditch on the side of the road. The young policeman took a notebook out to repeatedly

confirm our faces, before taking out a walkie-talkie to report to someone.

"What should we do? Run?"

Even though the policeman had already grabbed me by the arm, I still whispered that into Mafuyu's ear. However, she shook her head quietly.

That was the end of our journey.

While waiting for his superior's reply, the policeman hounded Mafuyu for her signature, and even asked her to sign the police notebook. Hey, is that really okay?

We were then brought to the train station. There were quite a few cars at the bus stop, and a huge group of adults had gathered—they were all faces I hadn't seen before. It wasn't till much later that I found out they were members of the orchestra that had come down specifically to look for Mafuyu, though some cops were mixed in as well. After they had confirmed our identities, the whole group of them rushed up to us with a "Whoa!" which scared the heck out of us.

Miss Maki was among them as well. Oh shit, what's she doing here! Doesn't she need to go to school? Or does she have more time to spare because of her position as the music teacher? She walked up to me with huge strides and a sweet smile on her face, and the first thing she did was award me a slap.

"No, wait....."

Before I could explain, she slapped me on the other side of my face.

And then—

A car came speeding towards the bus stop at great speeds, and even drifted a bit before stopping just as it was about to slam into a police car. The person to open the door and step out of the car was —

"Papa?"

Mafuyu murmured that using a voice only I could hear. The person rushing over was indeed Ebisawa Chisato. His shirt was a mess,

and his eyes were dark and puffy, perhaps because he hadn't slept all night. His hair was messy, like the mane of a defeated lion.

"So you really came here? What in the world were you doing these past two nights? Think about how worried we all were—"

"..... What about your concert? Isn't it supposed to start today.....?"

Mafuyu mumbled as though she were dream-talking. Ebichiri arched his eyebrows in response.

"What are you talking about? How can I carry on with the concert when you're missing? To think that you actually ran away from home!"

Ebichiri suddenly directed his attention at me, and pounced on me.

"Was it you? Were you the one who led Mafuyu away—!"

He grabbed me by my collar and shook me repeatedly, but in a daze, all I could think was, "Ah—what, so he's a typical father who worries about his child too." I may have even smiled while thinking that. It suddenly felt like Ebichiri's furious roars were something trivial to me.

"What were you thinking! How are you going to take responsibility if anything happens to Mafuyu—"

Suddenly, Mafuyu came in-between her father and me and pushed us apart. I fell to the floor and landed on my butt, due to the sudden push, and all I heard was a loud, sudden *pa*.

Mafuyu looked in disbelief, at the hand she used to slap her father—the right hand with the immobile fingers. Ebichiri, with his face swollen from the slap, was stunned for a brief moment. A surge of anger reappeared in his eyes, and he slapped Mafuyu back. Just as Mafuyu was about to fall on me, due to the force of that slap, Ebichiri quickly grabbed her by the shoulders to prevent her from falling.

"In any case, apologize to everyone here!"

Ebichiri dragged Mafuyu to the center of the crowd, and all I did was blankly stare at her back. Is this bad habit of immediately giving up hereditary?

After Mafuyu and I were brutally lectured by the three policemen in charge, the rest of the searchers gradually began to leave in their cars.

Mafuyu directed a glance at me as she was escorted into the car by Ebichiri.

The expression in her eyes was no longer filled with dark clouds like before; instead, it was a little happy, but a little lonely as well—I don't really know either.

Ebichiri then popped his head out of the window of the driver's seat and said,

"You come in as well! I'll give you a lift."

The back door of the car opened, and I was really grateful for his offer. Even though the atmosphere in the car would probably be really awkward, the idea of not needing to spend the next few hours riding a train home was indeed rather enticing.

"Sorry, Maestro Ebisawa, but this person will be taking the train back with me."

Miss Maki's cold voice came from above my head..... Damn, she's really scary. I didn't have the guts to turn around to look at her.

Ebichiri nodded his head and pulled up the window. Hey, don't agree to it that easily! At least insist on it for a while?

However, the Ebisawa father and daughter pair drove away just like that, leaving me by myself in the wake of the exhaust. The other cars began driving away as well. As I looked at the car plates passing by me one by one, even though my feelings were no longer the same as they were back then, what I was thinking certainly was.

No, I can't let her go just like that.

I hadn't given her the application form for the band yet. Even if she had already decided to go to America, and wouldn't be returning to our school—

Even so, the exhaust drifted further and further away from me, and all that was left in the end, were the faint sounds of the waves of the sea.

There was no other person at the bus stop. I was left by myself

yet again.

And oh, wasn't a person behind me, but a demon.

"Well then, Nao. I have plenty of things to talk about with you. You should've more or less expected this, right?"

Miss Maki said that in a terrifyingly kind voice, while lifting me up by my collar with her crazy strength. All I could do, aside from sighing, was sigh even more. And with that, the journey of us running away from home came to an end.

And that means, despite me coming up with excuses like wanting to go to the toilet or wanting to buy a drink—I tried coming up with all sorts of reason to escape—I still couldn't flee Miss Maki's interrogation.

Notes

1. Nao actually called it by the Japanese name as クロウタドリ. But it doesn't sound quite right to say blackbird again, so I've just placed its binomial name there.

Chapter 20 - The Piano Sonata of Goodbye

The June without Mafuyu was about to be over.

The unique characteristic of my classmates in the Third Class of First Year, was that their interest in things typically didn't last very long. Even so, there were still some people who came to me asking about things related to Mafuyu (the incident of us running away from home together had already spread throughout the entire school, which made me seriously consider just transferring to another school). Some of them, who seemed to know nothing about classical music, had even borrowed some of Mafuyu's CDs from me.

Perhaps it was because the seat next to me was always empty.

But I had a horrible personality, so I didn't treat the newbies with any leniency at all, and decided to lend them pieces composed by the Russian composers Scriabin and Prokofiev first. Despite that, the classmates who borrowed the CDs still looked really happy.

"This is great! The photo on the cover looks really impressive!"

Go back and listen to the CD!



"There's actually two private guards at Ebisawa's house! Even I was quite surprised by that."

We decided to take a break during our practice on the roof. Kagurazaka-senpai said that to me with a gleeful expression.

"I originally thought there wouldn't be a lot people at her house, since it's huge, so I thought it'd be a piece of cake for me to slip onto the premises—but that was a naive thought. Luckily for me, she had gone to see the doctor that day."

So Senpai really was the one who secretly slipped that CD with the map into Mafuyu's bag.

"Why did you do that?"

Senpai was cleaning the neck of the guitar, which had had all its strings removed. She tilted her head and said,

"Plenty of reasons! I thought something might've happened if I did that, yeah? Well, doing that may not have been good for Ebisawa Mafuyu and you. Of course, there was also the possibility that nothing might've happened as well. However, one doesn't have to gather a huge group of people to start a revolution! If us humans want to accomplish something, we have to first plant the seeds that may not bloom, in the land of the wilderness."

For a person like me, who isn't poetic at all, that sounded like "Oh, it felt like something interesting might happen, so I decided to create an opportunity for that to happen." Therefore, I was not grateful to her at all.



As for Chiaki, after performing the armlock and camel clutch on me, she followed with a cobra twist.

"It hurts, it really hurts! Those aren't moves from Judo, right!?"

"I called you so many times, and yet, you didn't even message me a reply!"

"I'm sorry! Owwwwwww!" I repeatedly tapped on Chiaki's arm to beg for her forgiveness, but she had no intention of letting me off the hook.



"So you said you met Ebichiri? Did you tell him that you're my son?"

Tetsurou asked me that rather unhappily while I was preparing dinner in the kitchen.

"He always complains to me. Since he's the one who pays for the international call, I always deliberately go on and on. Keke!"

"I think he probably overheard it when someone asked my name?"

I'm not quite happy saying this, but most of the people in the music

industry know the name of Hikawa Tetsurou's son, so Ebichiri probably knew as well. I decided to just go with that, because it would've been disturbing if he had said something like "I recognize you just from your looks alone." But according to Tetsurou, I should take after my mother more, yeah?

"However, it's not quite like my son to be chased back home after only two days! You should've just disappeared like that! Though it would've been quite inconvenient without anyone to do the housework, I could've seen the face of that stupid-papa Ebichiri close to tears!"

So the worth of my existence is connected to something as stupid as that? I should just consider running away from home for real next time.....

"Ah, sorry, I'm just joking. I'd be really troubled if Nao weren't at home. I don't even dare go to the toilet by myself at night....."

"Then just wet your bed instead!"

"Oh right, was there any sort of development between the two of you during the two nights? I'm not asking where you guys went, yeah? Come on, say it..... Tell me the details, since I'm your father....."

I threw an empty can at Tetsurou, and that shut him up.



June went by just like that.

That practice room was still left untouched as it was, as the owner of the padlock hadn't returned yet. I wouldn't have any problems picking the lock open, but Kagurazaka-senpai said, "That's a violation of the rules." Since I didn't manage to get Mafuyu to sign the application form for the club, the ownership of that room didn't belong to me yet; moreover, I didn't intend to use that room alone anyway.

I had no idea why, but the people around me no longer asked me about things related to Mafuyu, and no one told me where she went either. The only thing I could do was practice on the roof daily to brush up on my techniques. I had even learned a few new songs.

It was said that Mafuyu ended up following her father to America, though it was a few days later than what was planned. I saw that information in a magazine though, and had no idea how trustworthy that article was.

Did she accept the checkups? Did she decide to go on with the operation somewhere?

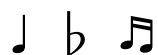
It was obvious, even to me, how much Ebichiri doted on his daughter. Should he get tired of Mafuyu constantly running away, he might even decide to permanently reside in America.

Perhaps I may never get the chance to see Mafuyu ever again.

Ebichiri's performance in Chicago was broadcasted in Japan via satellite—one of the pieces performed in the concert was Rachmaninov's [<Piano Concerto No. 2>](#). I was holding onto a slight hope, but the pianist was obviously someone whom I didn't know. Even if her fingers had already recovered, it wasn't possible for her to stage a comeback that quickly.

I switched off the television and recalled the Bach Mafuyu had played on that day. Book 1 of <The Well-Tempered Clavier>, Prelude and Fugue No. 1 in C major—the unbelievable power that allowed me to find my bass might've already disappeared completely, without a trace. However, the power of music is indeed great. Come to think of it, all I had to do was place the silver disc in the music player and press the play button—and Mafuyu would appear before me.

Music is but a bunch of notes and the arrangement or superimposition of them. We humans, afraid of loneliness, are the ones who interpret them in many different ways.



Mafuyu had only sent a single letter to me. It came to me on a Sunday, right after noon. I was in disbelief for quite a long time when I realized the sender was *Mafuyu Ebisawa*.^[1]

There was nothing written in the envelope; instead, there was only a tape. I dug out the dusty tape recorder and pressed the play button. What flowed from the speakers was the grievous prelude of

the piano sonata in E ♭ major.

Beethoven's <Piano Sonata No. 26 in E ♭ major>.

It was a piece that Beethoven had written to his best friend, whom he was separated from because of war. Moreover, even though it was rare for him to title his pieces, he gave it the title,

<The Farewell>.^[2]

I passed the tape to Tetsurou without saying anything. After listening to it, he said,

"The parts of the left and right hand were recorded separately, then merged together. So that means..... her right hand hasn't recovered yet, right?"

"..... Mmm."

However, this was indeed a piano piece played by Mafuyu—I could tell just by listening. It was probably recorded using the sound recorder I had helped repair?

The precious thing that her mother had given her.

"..... But that's quite a horrible piece she chose, yeah? She's saying farewell to you! What a pity..... but I guess there's no helping it. It's your fault for being my son—you have to be prepared to not have a lasting relationship with women!"

"Just shut up and go back to your work!"

"Right, right....."

Tetsurou grabbed his lunch—a hand-rolled sandwich on a plate—and returned to his study room.

I knew what Tetsurou had said was a lie. That piano sonata was indeed written to mourn the separation, but there were pieces after the farewell.

The second movement titled <The Absence>, and the third, <The Return>.^[3]



And so, during a certain lunch break in early July, the back door of our classroom was suddenly flung open.

"Comrade Aihara, quick, it's about time to leave! Young man, you move quickly as well. Hurry!"

The voice of Kagurazaka-senpai came from behind me, and everyone in class focused their attention on me. Chiaki stopped her hand, halfway reaching out for my bento—her face was filled with surprise.

I turned my head around and noticed that Kagurazaka-senpai was actually wearing..... casual clothes at school? She was wearing a white shirt with a black-and-white photo of Jim Morrison printed on it, together with a denim miniskirt..... What the heck is she thinking?

"Senpai, you mean we're going somewhere?"

"To the airport. It's a four-thirty flight, so we won't be able to make it if we don't head there now! Move fast!"

"To the airport..... what for?"

"What else? The prison term of our fellow comrade is over, and she's about to come back. Obviously, we need to stage a rescue operation when she touches down on land!"

Chiaki and I looked at each other for a while, then, at the same time, grasped the meaning behind Senpai's words.

"Mafuyu..... she's coming back?"

"Yes. But because her father is coming back with her, they'll probably be visiting those boring geezers related to the College of Music right after they land. The airport will be our only chance to strike!"

"Huh? Wait, we still have two periods of homeroom later in the afternoon....."

"There's no time to be dilly-dallying!"

"Why do we have to rush?"

"Young man, you surprise me sometimes. Do you not know the reason? Next week, the student council will be allocating the funds that'll be given to the various clubs for the next semester. We won't be able to acquire any funds if we don't raise an application with four club members!"

"Eh.....?" Four members?

"Due to a certain useless person who didn't manage to accomplish his mission before Mafuyu headed to America, this is our last chance."

"W-We're gonna make her complete the application form right now?"

Before I could finish my sentence, Chiaki and I were already being pushed by the hands of someone—or rather, some people—out of the classroom.

"Go, go!"

"All Retiree does is to talk about the past anyway. You won't miss much even if you skip!"

"You're not allowed to finish the food she bought for us!"

So we were actually pushed by out classmates. Please, don't pick times like this to show how united you guys are, alright!?

"We'll help you mark your attendance!"

You'd definitely be caught if you did that in high-school, alright? Just as I was about to retort with that, the doors of the classroom slammed shut with a *bang*. Damn those people.....

"You guys aren't changing out of that uniform? Oh well, what should I do with you two? Whatever, since the summer uniform doesn't look like a uniform anyway, there shouldn't be a problem if you two remove the tie and bow-tie, yeah?"

"Senpai, please don't decide that for us!"

Just as I was about to continue with my protest, Chiaki removed the bow-tie from her neck.

"Then why don't you stay? I have a lot of things to say to Ebisawa, so I'm going as well."

"The operation I had planned can only be carried out with three people. Young man needs to be bait to lure the campus guards away."

"No way am I doing that!"

"Just kidding. Let's go!"

Senpai indiscriminately grabbed me by the arm, and dashed away

from the classroom.

Oh well, I guess I'll just give up. It should be fine skipping homeroom, right? I'll probably be awarded another slap if Miss Maki hears about this.....

As we ran past the entrance, the shrill cry of a bird suddenly rang out from high above my head. I lifted my head to look at the sky above me and could barely open my eyes, due to the rays of the summer sun—all I could see was a black-colored bird soaring past the sky.

Of course, that species of bird doesn't exist in Japan.

..... Or, maybe it really does. It's just still on the ground, dragging its tattered wings, thinking of a way to spread its wings to fly into the sky.

Therefore—

"Nao, faster! Or else you won't be able to catch up with Senpai!"

Chiaki was standing at the school gate, waving her hands hard at me.

I sprinted towards her with huge strides. And once again, it caught up to me—the cry of the bird, that had just come from the skies above me; the song that returned, after it had soared past the ends of the skies.

Notes

1. Written in romanji.
2. Name of the sonata's actually *Les Adieux*. It's split into three movements. The first, which is linked in the youtube, is named *Das Lebewohl*, which means 'The Farewell'. [Wiki link](#).
3. *Abwesenheit* and *Das Wiedersehen*. Refer to wiki link earlier.

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